

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

A WATERED GARDEN

A sermon preached on March 30, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Jeremiah 31:7-14 [NRSV] ⁷ For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." ⁸ See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. ⁹ With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. ¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." ¹¹ For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. ¹² They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. ¹³ Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. ¹⁴ I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

1 Peter 1:3-9 [NRSV] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith-- being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire-- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Sonja was of the fifth generation of Smiths to own the patch of arid Utah ground where her house and extensive garden sat. We were her guests, a few adults and a bunch of teenagers who had traveled west from the lush farm country of Central Illinois. Accustomed to July air so sodden with humidity that to take a deep breath risked drowning and to moist black earth that produced

sprouted crops by the megaton, we were fascinated by the dry high desert land that was Sonja's family heritage and her great pride.

We were in Utah to do a mission work project at Wasatch Academy, a Presbyterian boarding high school in the middle of Mormon country, created to educate sons and daughters of missionaries deployed around the world and to provide an alternative religious education for the non-Mormon community. We were there to help convert a barn into a dormitory – scraping, painting, window-washing, and trash hauling. Given the toil, the romance of the desert was lost on us at first. But then Sonja, a local friend of the school invited us over for a picnic, proudly showed us her land, regaled us with stories, and taught us something about valuing and devaluing, about privilege and perspective, and about stewardship and caring for one another.

It was nearing five o'clock, and the sun was already sinking behind the mountain range to the west, when Sonja glanced at her watch, jumped up, and said, "Everyone follow me!" We trotted after her as she headed for her garden – about an acre's worth of vegetables and flowers in vast array. Everything grew out of steeply sculpted furrows and mounds, and surrounding the garden, and interlacing it were trenches about five inches deep. A small mountain stream rushed by one end of the garden in a miniature canal, and it was here that Sonja stopped, checked her watch, tapped her foot, checked her watch again, and then stooped, grasped a short board that was resting at her feet, and inserted it in transverse grooves in the canal.

Instantly, the water was diverted from its bypass channel into the garden itself. As it ran, we noticed other diverter boards strategically placed to direct the water down the furrows, and Sonja, staring at her watch again and again, timing each run, switched boards from one course to another until the garden's whole network of mini-channels was flooded.

"I have the use of this water for ten minutes twice a day," she said, and at precisely 5:10, she removed the diverter board which had caused the garden to flood and allowed the stream to resume its course off her property toward downstream gardens unknown. "A hundred years ago my family and the others in the valley worked out this irrigation system. Wars have been fought over water rights in this territory – and my family fought a few themselves – 'cause the land is nothing but dirt if there's no water. If you sell out, the water rights go with the deed."

To us who came from a city on a river where enough water flowed by each day to satisfy the thirsts of several Midwest states, we who knew that water was an abundance and not a scarcity, we who wasted more water keeping our lawns green each July than Sonja used all year producing a garden, we who took for granted that this vital resource was just a twist of a faucet handle away, could hardly grasp the sense of mortal responsibility Sonja felt toward her neighbors downstream, how dependent she was on many strangers upstream, and how precarious was the life of her garden should the mountain snow pack be small one year, or should a railway tank car derail and spill poisons into the stream, or a significant increase in population in her area diminish the allotment of water for everyone.

I have found myself thinking of Sonja these days hearing news of flooding in Missouri or the debate on diverting Great Lakes waters to the southwestern states or the drought in Georgia. I thought of her when Katrina roared through New Orleans or other destructive hurricanes have overrun the gulf or tsunamis the South Pacific. Such a contrast between the stories of the annihilating abundance of water, on the one hand, and the tenuous hold on life desert people have because of water's scarcity, on the other. But especially I think of her when I consider our need of one another, our vulnerability to the elements of nature as well as the elements of history, and how we must live for one another and not carelessly ignore one another if our lives are to be, as Jeremiah put it, like "a watered garden." It will only be produced by the intentional stewardship Sonja practiced in hers.

Sonja's splendid garden was meticulously cared for and generously watered in spite of scarce resources because of a common sense of stewardship her ancestors developed and she and her neighbors continued. A durable respect not only for the law but also for the commonwealth of community supported the structures of stewardship against nature's fickleness and the selfishness of the human heart.

Some of the lessons of disasters like floods and hurricanes have to do with respecting flood plains and constructing dikes and dams. But other issues are equally straight-forward and have to do with community and justice and mutual respects – such as the dynamics of racism and poverty which typically assure that those who are afflicted most and assisted least before, during, and after a disaster are the poor, persons of color, and children. This is true throughout the world where nature's fury and humankind's disdain combine to create unabated misery.

The list is long and growing longer. Desertification – the return of arable land back to desert – is increasing around the world, with subsistence farmers and nomadic peoples suffering most. Glaciers, which store an enormous amount of the world's fresh water supply, are melting, meaning that fresh water will ultimately become sea water. Polar ice caps are diminishing, and more rapidly than previously thought. Sonja's little acre of vegetables and flowers are represents but a microscopic patch in regards to the earth's need and use of water, but it is in her choices and in her practice and that of her upstream and downstream neighbors that we can understand the core issues of caring for one another and caring for the earth. It is, indeed, a stewardship of all of life, and it underscores the principle that nothing any of us does is ever a private matter.

The prophet Jeremiah's image of life becoming like a watered garden was heard by people whose lives were parched, dry, and hopeless. Their national life had been devastated. According to the prophet, what had brought this on was neither earthquake, flood, or storm, nor even the terrors of sword and spear, but the moral decadence on the part of the nation's leaders who sought wealth and power for themselves while caring nothing for the people for whom they held stewardship.

In the midst of devastation, Jeremiah could imagine restoration where tragedy and loss will be turned to gain. Deprivations would not only be abated,

but reversed by the hand of God. Exiles would return to the lost land with great shouts of joy. The disenfranchised and the abused would gain power and strength. Scarcity would turn to abundance, and their life would – in his pregnant phrase – *become like a watered garden*.

I think of Sonja's well-plotted acre, of her deep gratitude for sufficiency out of scarcity, of the ordered cooperative spirit of neighbors, of the structures of justice which guarantee that what is needed shall always be there. And then I think of the garden which is this earth, and I wonder if a similar sense of common responsibility can be built and whether a common sense of stewardship around economic and political matters can be erected so that the life of the world might become a watered garden.

Whenever there is a disaster, news reports tell of the flood of donations which pour in seeking to relieve suffering. The problem is it seems to take a disaster to prompt awareness and generosity. The response to crisis is episodic and sympathetic while it needs to be structured and consistent. That is, we give generously when our attention is arrested by some enormity, but what about the kind of consistent, dedicated thoughtfulness and giving that is based on who we are as persons under God, and what we believe as Christians is ultimately true about being human, and what we know in faith God requires of us?

Consider, for instance, Sonja's situation and apply to it the same principles by which we often confront situations of race and poverty, or the husbanding of natural resources, or the care and nurture of the earth on behalf of future generations. Instead of living and thriving in a mutually dependent partnership, her situation might be like this: whether or not her garden got watered would depend on her upstream neighbors' mood, or whether she spoke the same language or had the same skin color, or whether she had economic and political clout. It would be like Sonja deciding to keep all the water for herself because she decided to have a bigger garden, or she was angry at one of her neighbors downstream. She may decide to lift her diverter board only a half inch to allow a trickle to flow in her neighbor's direction to make her point.

In scripture we learn of the extravagance of God – the inexhaustibility of God's love and of God's durable presence to us and creation. We learn of the covenant God has established with us and of God's faithfulness to that covenant. Covenants – like water rights – carry obligations. We are obliged to set aside anger and fear as means of dealing with one another. We are obliged to share what we have, and to remember that to whom much is given, much is expected. We learn we are called to minister to the world without discrimination, to welcome and include the stranger, to bind up one another's wounds, to slake one another's thirst. We are obliged to think modestly of ourselves and put others first, and we are obliged to forgive others as extravagantly as God forgives us. When we hoard our wealth, when we claim privileges for ourselves we would deny others, when we determine who is deserving and who is not based on our narrow interests, when we allow selfishness or anger to determine how we give, we flout the generosity of God, lead lives that are miserly in spirit and in intent, and life becomes like a walled off, parched and withered garden.

Sometime this spring or summer or fall we will hear of a disaster – a devastating flood or hurricane, an earthquake or a fire. At that time many of us will dig a little deeper and give for the relief of suffering. But it is not just the extraordinary response that God demands of us, but the routinely responsible one. We rise to occasions; can we rise to faithfulness and dependability each and every ordinary day? Cataclysmic events catch our attention, but where is our attention daily in the face of abject poverty, genocidal revolt, incessant war, and rampant disease? These grinding, quotidian disasters are so much a part of accepted life we fail to notice how withered our neighbor's garden is until, in with eyes opened by the love and justice of Christ we begin to see suffering and respond to God's promises in faithfulness.

The Bible teaches that the earth is the Lord's. It teaches that we reap what we sow. It teaches that the mercies of God are unlimited and overflowing for the entire world. Why, then, do we decide in selfishness and fear? Why do we claim much for ourselves and leave little for others? Do we not trust God's economy? Gardens bloom when watered regularly, faithfully, intentionally, and generously. It follows that we should harvest only what we have cared for.