

Pastor Roy's sermon from March 24, 2019 (Lent 3)

Children: What are gardeners doing these days? Turning **compost**. **Planting** lettuce, kale, radishes, spinach, onions, garlic, and peas. What would you plant if you were growing a garden? Spraying trees and **pruning** trees. Do you have to do something to the soil before you plant? Compost, dig up the dirt. Mulch. Why do people plant things? Just to eat or is it fun to watch things grow? What is your favorite vegetable?

The curve of grace slopes gently, patiently, quietly. Grace never grows weary of her freedom. Mercy wins the day. Even when the journey strikes terror in the heart of the traveler. Perhaps mercy is undefeated because the Spirit of God is free. The Spirit is not confined by the things that confine us. Isn't that good news? In a sense, that is the Gospel. Freedom. Mercy. Love.

Today I hear Jesus inviting us to step into the *long* patience of God. We are tempted to avoid taking chances, to stick with what we are sure of—so that we do not make mistakes or fail. We might even think, better to be too careful and stand still, than to leap forward into a wonderful possibility and fail. Grace gives perspective and courage to take chances because it grounds us in the creative love of God. And yet true love is not as much about courage as about the joy of perfect freedom. Free to take chances for the good of another, in love.

In the story of the gardener, Jesus is inviting us to follow our holy hunches.

Can you think of a time in your life when you acted on a hunch—hope in a good result. You could not prove that things would work out the way you were hoping they would. But you were convinced enough that you acted despite no guarantee. You moved forward. Perhaps others questioned your wisdom. But you decided to act.

So it is with our faith and how we act on our faith. In Jesus' story, the gardener says to the landowner, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, go ahead and cut it down. The gardener does *not* say, "I'm pretty sure it will bear fruit next year, leave it alone and you will see. It will produce." The proposition is simple--if it bears fruit, good, if not, cut it down. The gardener is taking a chance, by investing, by being patient for a year. Time will tell. Maybe it will work, maybe not.

Faithfulness is not about guarantees. It's about opportunity, investment, and love.

This is as true for congregations as it is for individuals. If we have an idea for ministry, we don't have to know for sure that it will succeed. It can be a holy hunch that we can compassionately bring wholeness to our community with a plan. If we wait until we are totally sure that it will work, we may never be all that helpful in the community. We are

tempted to keep the grace of God to ourselves. We are tempted to mistrust our ideas. We may allow the fig tree to be cut down when all that was needed was a little fertilizer and tender loving care.

There are families that can be loved by this congregation. There are hungry people to be fed through a creative idea, or perhaps struggling family that could find affordable housing by an equally creative idea. Perhaps there is a lonely widow or widower who is open to being welcomed into a larger family, the family of God. Can we take a chance, make ourselves just a little vulnerable to take the first step for the idea, for the welcoming?

There is no burden of proof for those who faithfully set out to serve God, to serve neighbor. If an idea for ministry does not bring the harvest for which we hope, we pause, regroup, and move on to the next opportunity. We are not driven by success, we are driven by grace which sets us free to be faithful without fear. We have opportunities to share. Grace is an invitation, not a command. Faithfulness does not crush us with responsibility, it sets us free to love.

And there is no failure in love. Love grounds us, gives us courage, and sets us free to act. Those who love are free. Free to take chances for the sake of love. Free to take chances for kindness and friendship. Love provides its own energy. This is the energy of God, the Spirit. The more we love, the more we *can* love. There is no limit to love. There is no limit to friendship. There is no limit to the opportunities before you!

The gardener asks, "What do we have to lose by taking a chance for grace?"

This snapshot of grace is, "Take a chance, seize this opportunity, maybe it will bear fruit."

The People of God choose grace because we see it all around us in creation, salvation, in love, and friendship. Choose grace friends, choose grace. You have the opportunity before you right now to choose grace. Please do.

There is no end with Grace. None. Constant new beginnings, new possibilities, new maybes. And every day is a new day ripe with possibilities. The value of being together as a congregation is that your efforts are multiplied as you work together. Work together. There is no other way.

Lead us God, show us the way of the gardener, the way of patience, the way of opportunity. The way of your love. Amen.