

Love Our City: Gardeners of God

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Isaiah 58:6-12

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the straps of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you;

the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."

If you remove the yoke from among you,

the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness

and your gloom be like the noonday.

The LORD will guide you continually

and satisfy your needs in parched places

and make your bones strong,

and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water

whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;

you shall be called the repairer of the breach,

the restorer of streets to live in. Isaiah 58:6-12 (NRSV)

Let us pray: *God, open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear, and open our hearts, God, that our compassion will be full and it will propel us to open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

So downtown in Houston on Franklin Street there is the old post office and it's been converted into something called Post Houston. It's a venue that has all sorts of stuff. There's a co-working space, a food court, some shops, and a whole host of things to do in this building. But what I find most cool is that the roof of the building has been converted to a park – a five-acre park. They call it Sky Lawn and it has all sorts of stuff up there, too. Right in the middle of the city there's a park. It's five and a half acres – the building is big. And a little bit over one acre of it is called Sky Farm. This is a garden on the roof in the middle of the city.

It's run by an organization called Blackwood Educational Land Institute. They roust up volunteers to take care of the garden and water it, and all the food that's grown there goes to Houston Food Bank to be distributed to various places in the city. It's a garden right in the middle of the city.

I want you to think about that as an image. Because I believe it's what we're called to do. It's to work with God to build a garden in our city. If you look at the trajectory of Scripture, it's book-ended by two gardens. And in fact, the pivotal moment in Scripture happens in the Garden of Gethsemane, the fulcrum of the story.

It begins in the Garden of Eden; *Gan Eden* is the word in Hebrew, and it literally means “the place of paradise” or “the Garden of Paradise.” It is an example, or a sign of God's constant provision for us. But if you go to the end of the story, you get a different kind of garden. This is Revelation 22 and if you have a New International Version Bible probably it says as the heading “Eden Restored” or “Paradise Restored.” Here's what it says, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of

fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 22:1-2).

We have to begin with the end in mind. The end in mind is that Jesus came to redeem God’s creation. To put God’s creation right again. That’s the image of the Kingdom of God. To restore this Garden of Eden that God created. By the river that flows from the fountain of the water of life. And we are to be in that business. So, Jesus’ mission... he says, this is my mission, “I’ve come to set the prisoner free, and to bind up the broken hearted... and to reach those who have been neglected and forgotten in the world around us.” This is the Kingdom of God and Jesus says its beginning now. It’s starting right now. It won’t yet be completed until the end, but it is breaking forth right now around us. And we as the Body of Christ are to be a part of that work. That’s what we are to do.

I’m going to be honest. Too many Christians believe that the purpose of the Christian faith is to live our lives here and now in such a way that when we die, we’ll go to heaven. That we here would live our lives on this place so that we’ll go become a part of the Kingdom of God when we die. All of that is true. Of course, that’s true. We want to do that. We want to experience God’s grace that gives us eternal and everlasting life.

But the mission of Jesus is far more than that. You just said it a few minutes ago when you prayed the prayer. You didn’t say “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name... let me do your will here so that it will be done in heaven so that I can get to heaven. I’m anxious to get there soon, God.” You’re not praying that. No, it’s the other way. “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” It isn’t primarily to get Christians on earth to heaven, it’s to get heaven to earth. And we are to be a part of that. It may be finished in our lifetime if Jesus comes again. It may not but we want to be a part of that re-creating this garden in the middle of the city of God in the New Jerusalem.

What does that have to do with our Scripture today? Well, our Scripture today is from what we call Second Isaiah, it’s a call on the Children of Israel that when they are heading back to Jerusalem after they’ve been in exile - how they’re to behave and what worship is to be like. In fact, this passage would be called, the heading I think is “True and false worship.” The passage we read today begins this way: “Is not this the fast I choose?” (Isaiah 58:6a).

Now what’s a fast? So, a leader, a king, or a priest would call a fast and that fast would be to say “We’re going to have an intense time of prayer and repentance and worship. We’re going to

come together – we’re going to have a ‘Come to Jesus’ meeting...” This was before Jesus, but they were saying, “We’re having a time together when we experience the power and presence of God. And we’re going to be intense about it. And it’s going to be amazing.”

That’s the picture. He’s calling a fast, “Let’s get everyone together and we’re going to worship God and focus on God.”

In February of last year 2023 something happened at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky. They were in a chapel service there and for lack of a better word, revival broke out. The Holy Spirit poured in. They called it the “Asbury Outpouring.” The chapel service got to the time it was supposed to end and it didn’t. It just kept going. The young people there worshipping at Asbury University would text their friends. They’d say, “An amazing thing was happening here.” And people began to come. And they came from miles around. They spilled out onto the Commons there. The place was packed full of young people worshipping and praying and praising and singing. Down on their knees. It was a powerful emotional time. And it wouldn’t end. The media came so more and more people came. They would get in their cars from other universities and drive over and it went on from February 8 all the way to February 24.

The Asbury Outpouring and I think the college finally shut it down. What an amazing picture. That is worship. No, no, that’s half of worship. That’s part of worship. Because that’s what he says. He says, “Is not this the fast I choose? To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free. To break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless pour into your house when you see the naked to cover them. Not to hide yourself away from your own people. But instead to do something with it.” There is a rhythm to worship and both parts of it are worship.

There is a gathering. You come together and you have an amazing experience. You come, you worship, you hear the word preached. You sing, you listen for the presence of God. You offer yourself in praise and thanksgiving for what God’s done for you. That’s part of worship. Then worship continues as you go out the door with the fast God has chosen to carry that outward. To let the flow of that stream go into the world around us.

The Superbowl is coming and some of you are going to Superbowl parties. I’ll probably sit in front of my television at home. Some of you will just go to the grocery store because you know that no one will be there at that time, and it’ll be easier. Some of you will do that. But some of you will watch the Superbowl. Some people will have paid thousands and thousands of dollars to get seats

to actually go to the Superbowl. So, I want you to imagine that you've gone to watch the Superbowl, and they come running out of the tunnels and the fireworks are going and all the hubbub and stuff. Then they come running out on the field in their pretty uniforms. The lights are gleaming and flickering off of them. They go and they have the ceremonial flipping of the coin. One team says they'll receive, and they come out on the field in a huddle and they get together in the huddle – and they just stay there. That's it; they stay in the huddle for three hours while you watch them in the huddle. They never play the game, never go out from that place. They just huddle.

Sometimes I worry that we can't be a church that just huddles. No, we have to go out. Suppose this amazing choir gathered every Wednesday night, and rehearsed and rehearsed and it was intense. It is intense – I've watched them. There's no messing around – they have a little break there where they're nice to each other then they move on. It's like "Next!" and they turn it on, and they move on. But what if every Wednesday night they rehearsed and rehearsed but never came out here and sang? Pretty soon they'd all quit. There's no point in just coming to rehearse. That's what we do in here – we rehearse.

Our Pure Sound youth choir is one of the best in the country. Why? Because they sing every week. They don't just come together and practice, they sing every week.

Worship is this coming together and then going out and all of that is part of worship. This movement out.

What happens if we do that right? What do we experience if we do that right? Verse 11 says, "The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like the spring of waters whose waters never fail." (Isaiah 58:11). That's my favorite image for the life of the church. That out of the presence of God in this place this spring of water that bubbles up from here the tributaries flow out of this place and water the garden around us. That Garden of Eden that Jesus is restoring with his presence and power and the Holy Spirit. Flowing out of this place like a spring of water.

If you ever get the chance to go to Israel I hope you go to Banyas – that's in the far northern part of Israel. It used to be called Caesarea Philippi. You can read about it in Matthew 16. But it is one of basically three sources of the Jordan River. It is beautiful and powerful and the water bubbles out of the rock. It just keeps pouring out and it's blue and cold and clear. It comes pouring out of that place. It's this spring of living water.

It's kind of funny – if we take pilgrimages and trips to Israel – please let us be able to do that again sometime soon. We go to one of the places where you can go to remember your baptism or if you've never been baptized to be baptized. You're immersed in the Jordan River and it's a beautiful experience. But most of the people like to fill little water bottles with water from the Jordan River that they can bring back for kids or grandkids or friends to use for baptisms. I always tell them, "Don't get it here – wait till we get up to Caesarea. Wait till we get to Banyas because that's where it's clear. Here it's nasty. So, get your water up there where it's clear and not here where there will be a little bit of funk floating in it."

I wish I believed that the water from the little tap that you can buy it from is really water from the Jordan, but it might be from Israel waterworks. I don't know.

Anyway, it's just such a beautiful picture of this bubbling spring of life. Why? Because it flows. I want you to contrast that with a pool. A pool doesn't flow anywhere. It just stays in the same spot and doesn't go anywhere. What happens to that? Well, it gets stagnant and algae grow, and it's unhealthy. Sometimes people will say, "I feel my faith is really stagnant." Maybe it's just because it's just this way and it's not flowing out into the world around. It's not pouring out into those tributaries.

One of the reasons I love being a part of St. Luke's is that I see those tributaries all the time and you're already doing it. I'm not telling you to do something you're not already doing. You're doing it. Every place I go I see St. Luke's at work. Let me say it one more time – the work of the church is not just what we do as an institution. It's not just what we do with the money you contribute to our budget; it's not just what we do with our volunteers and church projects. The work of the church is what the people of the church do as they live their lives in the world. If you're working at MD Anderson Hospital, if you're raising money to cure cancer, then that's the work of the church. You're doing the work of the church.

When I walk through the city and I see someone coaching Little League, and I think, "That's a St. Luke's person and they're doing the work of the church." If I walk through the hospital and I see someone working the volunteer booth and I'm so pumped. We talk and we visit of course because they're a person from St. Luke's and they're doing the work of the church. And the key is for us to begin to understand it. That's why we're doing this whole "Love Our City" emphasis. To help us all understand what we do in the world around us is to be the work of the church. What we do is we have to say if I'm coaching Little League...let me ask you...there a bundle of you who

coach Little League. I'm going to ask you a question. Are you praying for the boys in your group every day? Or at least week either before or after practice? Or girls – are you praying for the boys and girls?

Are you thinking to yourself, “Are these children knowing how much they're loved because of the way I'm treating them?” That transforms just coaching Little League to doing of the work and character of Christ. We are the church and if we don't flow out then we become stagnant.

So, here's the “Love Our City” challenge and it's really simple. It's for every one of us to do one deed of loving kindness, one good thing, one deed of loving kindness every day between now and Easter. You're probably doing that. But I want you to think about that as the work of the church. Thinking, “I am being the church in the world as I do this thing.”

We're going to look at three ways. Today we're talking about as we have been the organizations that we work in. And so, we'd love to know what organizations you're working in. It might be raising money for something. You might be contributing money to something. You might be volunteering in some capacity. You might be working as a paid person in some organization. We want to know what those are. Not because I'm trying to count it or anything but because we want there to be this spirit of encouraging one another in the work that we're doing.

Now maybe you're not involved in one and there are some great ways that you can be. If you go online, we have our Love Our City page, and you can hit the little button that says “Serve” and there are all sorts of ways you can be serving. Other organizations you can work with, other ways you can volunteer in our city. But for there to be some way for you to be involved in some of these amazing organizations. If you are already there's a little tear off in your bulletin you can use and drop it in the basket on your way out. I hope you'll do that. If you're online or even when you get home if you go to that “serve” button, there's a place you say “Here are the ways I'm loving our city in Houston” and I hope you'll fill that out. Because we want to be able to share those stories to encourage one another as we move forward.

So that's today. Next week we're going to be talking about how we love our city with simple deeds of kindness to our neighbors around us. Then on the third week, the week after next, we're going to be talking about how we love our city in our families and in our workplaces. The places where we spend most of our time.

So how are we going to be that stream of living water that flows out into the world around us. That's what we'll be talking about. There's a little art piece that we've made out in the Commons

area and it's a beautiful thing. We're taking little rubber bands, and you can take one as a way of symbolizing "I am heading out as a tributary to the world around us to bring about the garden of God." And there are little rubber bands you can use to do that. There are these great little wristbands that say, "You are loved" and they're a great way to remind ourselves that we are loved we love because God first loved us. Let's remember that. But it's also a great way to give it away.

I had one on and it fell off, so someone picked it up and found out they were loved. They didn't even know it until they picked it up off the ground.

There are all those different ways for you to keep in your mind "I am to be a lover of my city." And that's a conscious intentional decision that I'm embarking on as a follower of Jesus.

If you get a chance to go to Israel there is down in the very south the Judean desert. Go down to the Dead Sea down there. You'll go down there and want to float in the funky water there. It keeps you afloat – it's kind of cool. But it is out in the middle of the Judean desert. And as you're going you might have the opportunity to stop at a place called Engedi. There are some battles in Engedi in Scripture. There's the Engedi spring that flows out in the middle of the desert. It's the craziest thing. And way back in the first century they built these tributaries out of that spring. irrigation system out of that spring onto this terraced garden that's there. What you see is in the middle of the desert there is a spring of living water that waters a beautiful garden. That's what we're trying to do in the world around us. To be the people who carry that spring of water into the places that are parched and dry and need that life-giving presence.

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, we thank you for that spring of living water. And we pray, God, that we are not a stagnant pool but that we walk out of this place and carry that living water in our lives in our daily living and in our ordinary daily walking around life. That others would know just how much they are loved and that your garden – that Kingdom that you have promised – is coming to pass will grow around us. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*