

SERMON @St Georges – Karen Spoelstra, 8 August 2021

SLIDE: To teach, baptise and nurture new believers

Today we're continuing our series on the 5 marks of mission, and I will be focusing on the second mark of mission, - **To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.**

But first let us pray.

SLIDE: Vegetables and Flowers x 4

Every summer we attend the Annual A&P show in, Golden Bay. Our favourite thing to visit is the Produce tent. In the produce tent, local gardeners compete to see who can grow the biggest and best vegetable or flower. We have leeks, carrots and silver beet and roses, dahlias, irises. Once the judging is completed the public and the growers are allowed into the hall to find out what where they have placed, first, second or third. Will it be the Benjamin's or the Wylie's or the Smiths that will win the most ribbons?

For generations each family has kept their 'secret ingredient' close to their chest. Rumours abound as to what it could be, is it the chicken manure? Is it the seaweed? Or is it the homegrown organic spray? I suspect gardening in Auckland might be less intense, but every serious gardener that I know has their favoured garden tool, spray, or fertiliser.

However, the one thing all gardeners agree on is the importance of good soil. We shouldn't be surprised, after all today's gospel reading makes the very same point. Whether or not the seed flourished or died was determined by the soil in which it grew. And so, it is in our own spiritual growth.

SLIDE: Old white/green House

Let me tell you about our gardening efforts in Golden Bay and how we learnt to appreciate the importance of good soil. About 15 years ago we had the opportunity to buy a remote beachfront property from the local

famer. It sits on top of a sand dune beside the sea. The house had been built to accommodate farm workers so was devoid of any plants, that didn't scare us as we were pleased to have a blank canvas to start our garden. We had plans to deal with the prevailing westerly which could flatten our plants and the occasional easterly salt spray which could burn our plants but the one thing we hadn't planned for was the sand. You see plants need good soil to grow and sand is not. Sand has very few nutrients and doesn't hold water well. Very little we planted thrived because we hadn't paid attention to our local conditions, our soil.

SLIDE: The soil

The parable of the soil in Matthew's gospel describes different types of soil that received the seed of the gospel. Each of the soils came with its own unique challenges, one was too hard for the seed to germinate, and the birds swept in, one was too shallow for the seeds roots to take hold as it was full of rocks, and one had not been cleared of weeds which quickly smothered the seed.

Good soil is:

- Pliable not hard-baked
- Deep not shallow
- Rich not depleted
- Moist not dry

As individuals, we all have different beginnings, the soil in which our faith grows is unique to us. No one else has quite the same combination of family background, education, culture, personality, biblical understanding, that we do. For example, some of us were raised in Christian families, and others came to faith as adults. The gardens that will grow in our soil will look very different. Just like the restored garden of Eden described in the book of Revelation, there will be an abundance and diversity that reflects our contexts. Oak trees, flax bushes, sunflowers and green beans.

SLIDE: Truck, mulched garden, red house and completed garden

Whether your soil is rich or poor, all soil needs to be replenished, nutrients need to be added, irrigation systems need to be maintained and weeds need to be removed. We quickly realised our sandy soil needed to be enriched with organic matter, so we put time and effort into digging a truckload of mulch into the soil. We planted natives which were suited to our conditions and within 3 years our garden exploded into a place where the tuis came to feed and the fantails took refuge when it got cold. The taller natives sheltered the tender shrubs from the harsh winds and occasional frosts.

SLIDE: Gardening Tools

To encourage growth in our soil we needed to use the right gardening tools. We needed a spade to turn the soil, a wheelbarrow to carry the mulch and a rake to spread it. Just as in the same way we use the tools according to what are soils and plants need, we need to use the tools that will cultivate our spiritual growth, that may not always be the tools we are experienced or good at doing.

Like physical gardening, spiritual gardening will at times feel like hard work, we may get blisters or a sore back, we may have little to show for our efforts. Many of our plants will need time to put down roots and grow strong enough to weather the storms. We may suffer a drought and need to replant with more hardy seedlings.

Our spiritual gardening tools could be:

- Being accountable to a small group or life group
- Going on a silent retreat
- Meditation
- Bodily Exercise
- Fasting
- Keeping the Sabbath
- Journaling
- Spiritual Direction and many more.

There have been just as many intense debates amongst Christians as to what is the best way to “nurture believers” as there have been debates about the best way to grow things. Thousands of books have been written on the subject, some advocating the daily quiet time, the 3DM Triangle, contemplative prayer, or speaking in tongues. And just like gardening, there have been fashions.

At the heart of it, is how do we grow as Christians? And why can it be so hard?

One of the most foremost writers that I have found have helpful in answering this question is Eugene Peterson, author and writer of the Message Version of the Bible. Peterson argues that it is precisely so hard because we are approaching our spirituality like consumers. We’re like children in the ‘pick & mix” aisle in the supermarket choosing our favourite lollies. We enter our churches with the same mindset in which we go the shopping mall, to get something that will please us or satisfy an appetite or need. We might like contemporary music or the traditional hymns, prayer stations or set prayers, you get the picture.

Mostly, he says, we want to be in control. Peterson argues that it’s not more spiritual options we need but less.

SLIDE: Jonah in the whale

He directs us to the story of Jonah to show us what we need to grow as Christians. Imagine being sucked into the mouth of a big fish and trapped in its stomach. It was not Jonah’s happy place, that’s for sure. Having run in the opposite direction from where God had wanted him to go, he’s now trapped, sloshing around in the belly of a whale! His choices have disappeared. At his lowest point, he remembers the Lord and prays using the word of Psalms,

“But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you; whom I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’”

The belly of the fish is a place of confinement and severe and inescapable limits. We might have experienced something like this when we suffered

a serious injury, illness or loss. We feel helpless and unable to change our circumstances.

Peterson challenges us to immerse ourselves in such an environment voluntarily. For him, mature spirituality requires what he calls **'askesis'**, a training programme custom-designed for each individual in community. Askesis is to spirituality what a training regimen is to an athlete. Askesis is a calculated and deliberate interference with our desire to be in charge of our spiritual journey, it's not a spiritual technique or practice but an immersion in an environment where we are not in control.

SLIDE: The Psalms

At the heart of Peterson's Askesis is an insistence on praying daily through the Psalms. He believes the Psalms will give us the long apprenticeship in prayer that we need to grow into Christlike maturity. He describes the psalms as a bucket with which we can dip into the deep well of God's presence and word. It is the Psalms that will rescue our prayers from being all about ourselves and our own desires. Through praying through the Psalms, we will:

- learn to worship God in more profound ways than we could imagine
- wrestle with themes of injustice and absence
- delight in the company of God
- be challenged by our own brokenness
- understand and validate our emotions
- learn a form of prayer adequate to the complexities of life
- receive comfort from praying words that have been prayed for 1000's of years in contexts far more challenging than your own

If you need any further convincing Jesus, at the most vulnerable time in his life, in the garden and on the cross, prayed from the Psalms, like Jonah before him.

Over the last couple of years, part of my husband Chris's askesis has been to pray regularly through the Psalms. The psalms have forced him to pray in ways that he is unfamiliar and to be confined by the subject of the daily psalm irrespective as to how he's feeling. Chris has found, along with

others, he is using the psalms more when he is praying spontaneously, and he is praying more intelligently and more broadly.

There is still a place for spontaneous prayer in Peterson's askesis but it is a complement to rather than a substitute for praying the Psalms.

Secondly, Peterson believes gathering with other Christians on a Sunday is an essential part of our askesis. In a sense we are choosing to confine ourselves by going to church every Sunday, whether we feel like or not, whether the music is of our choosing, whether we like the preacher, of the quality of the morning tea. For as members of the body of Christ we recognise that we need each other to grow, in the same way that every garden benefits from companion plants.

Whether or not you adopt Peterson's askesis of daily praying through the psalms and regular attending church, the critical thing is we all need to construct our own askesis where we are no longer control of our spiritual growth.

“We have to find our own place, carve out our own time. We need something large enough to give our spirituality breathing room and ample space for a great variety of circumstances, moods, and levels of growth.”

Part of my askesis is using the church's lectionary, which offers me set readings daily readings which cover the whole bible, not just the bits I like. For that I have used 3 different bible apps, links will be made available in the next St G's e-newsletter. After having prepared this sermon I am particularly challenged to read the Psalms daily, - if that's something you'd like to commit to, come and see me or message me.

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Is there a secret ingredient to growing as Christians? Yes there is, firstly, it involves appreciating and cultivating our soil, our own personal contexts, so that they can sustain our prayer life. We have been fearfully and wonderfully made to grow beautiful and productive gardens that will look different to everyone else's, but from which everyone will benefit.

Secondly, if we want to be more like Jesus then we need to relinquish control of our own spiritual growth to Jesus. Our story as humans on this earth began with a garden and will end with a garden. We believe in a God who is the ultimate gardener who can be trusted to nurture us to maturity. Putting aside our own personal preferences and voluntarily restricting our choices is not an easy thing for any of us. A training schedule or form of askesis is essential. In the case of Jonah, this was forced upon him. For the rest of us, we need a similar experience of confinement to fully experience the transformative power of the gospel in our lives.

Whether we leave here this morning determined to pray a psalm every day, or whether we construct our own askesis, like our first attempts to grow a garden in Golden Bay – the most important thing is:

To get started,

learn as we go and

trust our Creator God.