

“How Does God’s Garden Grow?”

Jeremiah 17:7-8; Matthew 13:31-32; Revelation 22:1-2 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – April 26, 2026
2026-2027 Annual Stewardship Campaign – Consecration Sunday

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly absorb your love for our entire beings – mind, soul, and body. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Somehow without realizing there was already too much going on this month, I enrolled myself in a four-week course on the Old Testament offered through Disciples Seminary Foundation. The first three weeks have each been focused on one of the major sections of the Hebrew Scriptures. So we started with a week on Torah, and then a week on the Prophets, and then, this week, we’ve been looking at what’s called the Writings – mostly because that sounds better than calling it “everything else”!

Our instructor tried to help us make sense of the broad diversity of “the Writings” by naming four categories: prayer, lament, wisdom, and stories. We were asked to reflect on how these four forms of writing help sustain faith in difficult times. Given that the “stories” we read included Job and Ezra and Nehemiah, I’m not that convinced that the stories of the Old Testament are really all that comforting. But then I realized that when I turn to scripture, much of the time, I find spiritual food, not in stories, but in images and metaphors. I suppose these things probably fit into the amorphous category of “Wisdom.” If they’re coming from the mouth of

Jesus, we often call them parables, even when they're barely more than a brief metaphor like we just read from Matthew. But as I was reflecting last night on the way I've brought this garden-themed stewardship campaign back to trees this week, I realized, much to my chagrin, that my soul might be more of a poet than a storyteller. It's not that I don't like poetry exactly; I just really love novels. I've never quite trusted poetry; it too often seems like it's hiding something. In most of my life, I've been a "if you have something to say, just say it" kind of person. So I'm sometimes reluctant to admit that we cannot possibly expect to contain the vastness of the universe without language that is intentionally open-ended or obscured. As Emily Dickinson put it, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." Not everything can be approached as directly as I would prefer. Sometimes even stories are too clear.

And so we turn to the trees. I am fully aware that there is one perspective that sees trees and gardens in conflict. Gardens, after all, need good sun, and trees are notorious for their insistence on creating shade. But in scripture, this problem is mostly ignored. The most famous garden in the Bible is most famous for having what growing right in the middle? A tree. So while we can admit that these images of growing thing exist along a long spectrum – from vegetable gardens replanted every year to berry patches or perennials that come back every spring to orchards and even forests – the basics of plants remain the same: good soil for seeds to take root in, enough water but not too much, protection from other plants that would choke off

growth, and sunlight. Scripture invites us to add on another dimension that is perhaps more theological than botanical. The tree planted by water thrives because it does what? Bears fruit, even in the year of drought. The mustard bush becomes a tree that offers what? A home for the birds to build nests. The tree of life produces a supernatural twelve kinds of fruit, and its leaves are for what? The healing of the nations. All of these trees – even the one that is merely “the greatest of shrubs” – thrive, not merely for their own sake, but for something beyond themselves.

And that may be the biggest reason why trees are such a good metaphor for church. We’re not here to be really good at maintaining our capacity to be here. We’re here to bear fruit, to provide hospitality, to bring healing. The church does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of all God’s beloved creation. I would argue that, in this respect, humanity is not that different from trees, but we use trees as a guiding image here because the fruit they bear, the shade they provide, the healing they bring is so much more obvious than the ways we humans do similar things.

So how does this work? We started using Intentions Offerings, instead of merely Estimate of Giving cards, for our annual stewardship campaign a few years ago. The primary difference is that these Intentions Offerings ask about more than simply our financial commitments to this congregation. Because there are many things that go into maintaining the garden that is Vista La Mesa Christian Church. The lovely thing about a metaphor is that it can be applied in multiple ways. Who or

what is being cultivated in this scenario? Is it each of us as individual followers of Jesus? Or is it the community, the institution that is Vista La Mesa Christian Church? The answer to this question is Yes. The best way to ensure a church thrives is to fill it with faithful, growing, active Christians. So yes, we are tending to our own souls and we are tending to our shared life as a congregation. There were, of course, many ways we could have divided up the various metaphorical tasks of gardening into the many things that help a church thrive. But here are the ones we have today: We are asked to consider how we will plant seeds, which stands for the acts of service we will engage in. Will you volunteer with Welcome Saturday? Will you work with the Fellowship Committee or the Property Committee? Will you help coordinate Christian formation opportunities or other service projects? Our faith is rooted in our actions, how we spend our time and our energy. That is where we are most likely to meet Jesus and have the Word re-planted within our souls.

We are asked to commit to a regular schedule of watering the ground, by attending worship and developing our prayer life. If the seeds of service are not nourished by the water of worship and prayer they become merely good habits, rather than soul-sustaining practices. Water is what helps us grow, as the reflection and revelation that come through worship and prayer help us interpret and build upon our acts of service.

We are reminded that even the longest growing perennials need protection from weeds, so we are asked to commit to practices of study, whether that is attending our Sunday morning Bible study, Disciples Class, or reading the Bible on our own, or participating in Saturday Forums and other classes as they are offered. There are a lot of voices out there right now trying to tell us what Christianity is for and how we should be practicing it. Not all of them are telling the truth. But if we don't spend time discerning Christ's way for ourselves, we may have trouble telling the difference. The most important part of the task of weeding is being able to tell what to keep and what to pull up and toss away. Bible study and conversations about our faith with fellow Christians are what help us keep those abilities honed and ready for whenever we are asked to make such distinctions.

Finally, at the bottom of that Intentions Offering slip, it asks how we are going to feed the soil, which stands for our financial commitment. For the garden that is Vista La Mesa to stay healthy, ready for growth, hospitable to laying down strong roots, we have to continue to feed the soil. A church is not just a spiritual reality; it exists in the incarnate world, with structure and electricity and cables and employees and plumbing and coffee makers and all of that. Humanity, too, like the birds of the air, needs places to nest, to find respite and care. Feeding the soil – helping to sustain the congregation with our financial contributions – makes that possible. And again, even here, it's not just about cultivating the garden that is Vista La Mesa. By feeding

the soil with our monetary donations, we are also tending to our own souls, by reminding ourselves with our actions, that we are here on earth, not simply for our own sake, but for the sake of Something Bigger.

There is something that is vital for a garden to grow that is not included in the metaphors on this Intentions Offering. Did you notice what it is? It's part of the reason I decided to turn to trees today, moving beyond gardens that we tend in more hands-on ways. The image that isn't included in the list of commitments we're being asked to make is sunlight. Because there is Something Bigger. There are many things we can do to help our congregation thrive. But we can't make the sun shine. And that reminds us that this whole thing only works because God is willing it to happen. Without the Risen Christ guiding us forward, without the Spirit sustaining us as we go, the growth won't come. Our efforts – service, worship, study, stewardship – are really important, both for sustaining our congregation and for nurturing our own souls. But this is God's church, God's garden, and God is the one who will bring the growth. We aren't the farmer; we are merely the farm hands, the laborers in the vineyard. So let us give thanks that we have been invited into the work and find the roles that are best fitted to each of us. We are the leaves of a tree, a tree that was planted by God, and we will grow, grow, grow for the healing of the nations! Hallelujah and Amen!