

# *A Public Garden*

a sermon

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

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My mother loves to garden. More than that, my mother is a very good gardener. In fact, she is certified as a “Master Gardener,” having taken a good number of classes and put in many volunteer hours at the cooperative extension public gardens near her home in New Jersey. Both she and Dave, my step-father, maintain a large vegetable garden at their house, and in the warm months design and tend the flower gardens at the lake cottage they share with Dave’s siblings, enhancing the beauty there for themselves and for the many who pass by on Route 8.

Knowing my mom’s love for gardens (and Dave’s, too), I took them to the Lamberton Conservatory in Highland Park when they visited us last year. They loved it.

Have you seen that place? It’s beautiful. The Conservatory has plants and flowers from around the world, in a warm environment that feels a bit like a tropical rain forest (or what I imagine one would feel like). And they have turtles! *Love those turtles*. Except there is one turtle who is so mean to the others that they have to keep him (I think it’s a “him”) isolated. How sad!

Not all gardens are the same.

They have different plants; they have different purposes.

There are vegetable gardens and flower gardens.

There are rock gardens, Zen gardens,  
butterfly gardens, topiary gardens.

Some gardens are green and leafy; others are brown and arid,  
highlighting the plants of the desert.

Some gardens are for providing food, and others for providing beauty.

And some are private, while others are public.

There’s something really special, I think, about public gardens. Whether its purpose is to share beauty or to share space for growing food (like the community garden that Brighton Reformed Church had), a public garden enhances life, builds community, strengthens society.

I’m not saying that private gardens are bad. Just as flower gardens are not innately better or worse than vegetable gardens, both public and private gardens have their point and their purpose. Yet I am grateful for public gardens, as they have this openness to others I feel is so important, so hopeful and healthy and whole. It’s as if they are planted out of the expectation that the future will be both more lovely and more loving, both full of beauty and full of justice, inviting and inclusive.

And that, my friends, is what I think we should all be.



Something like this positive notion of a public garden is what I think of when I read the last verse of that passage from Isaiah before us:

*For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.*

These words were for a people in exile, living far from their homeland, living in a nation whose military had destroyed their cities and ripped them from their country. And so these words were like the promise of bright spring to those in a miserable winter.

God is telling them that it will again be like seedlings breaking through the soil.

God is telling them that they will again prosper.

God is telling them that they will again be strong.

In their winter, God is telling them that they will again know spring.

The signs of this new life, God tells them, will be twofold: they, the exiles, will be righteous, and they will praise God, both of these being obvious and visible and oh-so-public to all, as “righteousness and praise” will “spring up before all the nations.”

Of course, these won’t spring up by themselves, nor will they spring up because of what the exiles do all on their own. The “righteousness and praise” become possible, they get rolling, because of the work of God:

*The Lord **God** will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.*

God will make the people grow again, grow in numbers, grow in strength, sure, but even more grow in righteousness. God, the great gardener, will make them grow into a kind of public garden, so that others, even those from other nations, might be blessed and would then honor God.

But I must say a bit more about this “righteousness.” Because a good many people think of righteousness as something that lies in the heart and is seen only occasionally in the isolated acts of individual people. On this view, “righteousness” is invisible and private, a matter of internal dispositions and, maybe, of private, personal deeds.

Perhaps *you* think that.

But the understanding of “righteousness” here is much deeper and also much broader, something that surely lies in the hearts of individuals, but also something that is lived out in society, so that society and culture themselves are transformed.

Let’s go back to verse 8:

*For I the Lord love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.*

God loves justice. God hates robbery and wrongdoing. These are not just private acts. All these are public, societal deeds. God's treatment of the just and the unjust is public and societal and grounded in God's commitment to justice. Those with whom God makes covenant as justice is upheld and injustice is punished are the people, those whom he is about to reestablish as a good society.

Here's the thing:

God is not indifferent to how society is run.

God is not neutral about public good or ill.

No, God is *passionate* for *justice*.

And out of this passion comes God's promise to these exiles to restore them to their former glory.

God's promise of restoration is a promise of justice.

God's promise of renewal is a promise for the health of society.

God's promise reaches deep and wide.

God's promise touches not just the hearts of individuals

but even the activities and structures of society,

to bless them,

to judge them.

Here's where I'm at:

If you read this passage from Isaiah — my word, if you read the Bible! — and think it's saying that religion and godly living are merely private matters, things that concern only individuals, *then you're reading it all wrong*.

Let's hear the first two verses again:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners....*

Now if all this isn't public and social and societal, then what in the world could possibly be?



I hear and understand this promise as bound up with the person and work of Jesus Christ, he who was truly “anointed [to] bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners....” Maybe you do, too. And if you do, maybe you likewise expect, as do I, that righteousness is not merely private but also public, not just for the individual but even for society, not just for regular folk in their personal lives but also for leaders of nations and captains of industry *in their public work*.

Recall that Jesus acted and spoke in ways that deeply challenged people, not merely in their private and thus hidden lives, but also in their public lives as these affected others all around them.

You remember, don't you? Of course you do.

Recall that Jesus said and did things that called into question the status quo, that intentionally made people uncomfortable for the easy answers they were used to giving about all sorts of things that made it easy for themselves but difficult for others.

You remember, don't you? Of course you do.

Recall that, with regard to money,

and politics,  
and sexual mores,  
and the plight of women,  
and the power of the wealthy and privileged,

Jesus pushed and probed even as he pleaded and (for some but not all) persuaded. And for that he was not only loved, he was also despised.

You remember, don't you? Of course you do.

I have no question that if Jesus Christ's earthly ministry were taking place here and now, in our society, he would be hated, even by a good many church people.

He would be accused of engaging in "class warfare."  
He would be criticized for being "too political."  
He would catch heat for "playing the race card."  
His sermons would be judged as too meddling.  
His teaching would be seen as full of stuff that is "none of his business."

Jesus came to cause righteousness and praise to arise, these as the embodiment of justice in and among us. So it was inevitable that he would push some people's buttons, causing them to resist him and his message.

You remember, don't you, remember that God is passionate for justice? Of course you do.

So it is that we who have heard the call of Jesus, who have felt his tug on our hearts, must respond by aligning ourselves with God,

who loves justice,  
who is passionate for it,  
who desires peace within our hearts *and* within society.

Because we who have heard Christ's call and have felt his tug on our hearts, we cannot, we really cannot

continue to believe the lie that our Christian faith is only a private thing,  
nor can we keep on accepting the falsehood that religion is just between  
"me and God."

We really cannot continue to believe the lie that the church has no responsibility in and for society.

We really cannot any longer dabble in the fiction that righteousness touches only

on sex  
and drugs  
and curse words.

We cannot. We've got to stop.

Because, if we don't, more and more people will get it that we have betrayed our gospel, that we are hypocrites. And they will leave us alone to our falsehoods, and maybe even turn their backs on God, who is so often falsely represented by the lying words and misleading deeds of those who claim to be godly people.



We are heading for Christmas. It's only a week away! And I ask you:

can we truly long for the Christ child  
without also longing for justice and righteousness?

Can we truly celebrate his coming  
without also demanding the visible appearance of goodness in the public  
realm?

Can we truly dream for Christmas day  
without also desiring for peace to come and wars to cease,  
and not just wars in general,  
but the wars that we, as citizens of this country,  
are waging and preparing to wage right now?

Can we truly yearn for the celebration of the infant Jesus,  
without also yearning sincerely for justice, and peace, and righteousness,  
these as lived and enacted by us,  
these as made real within the society in which we live,  
these as extended to *every* "percent"?

Clearly, we cannot. Justice and righteousness are God's passion and God's gift. And as such, they are also the blessing we receive and the response we should gratefully offer.

Like a master gardener, God has planted us: in this time and in this place, in an age when participation in churches such as ours — traditional, once strong churches in the mainstream of the Christian faith — when such participation is dwindling.

God has planted us in this era, even as many of us remember a different era and maybe even pine for its unlikely return.

God has planted us, here and now, as a garden of righteousness, not one with gates and ticket takers, not walled off from outsiders, but as a *public* garden, so we may show before the whole world all the righteousness and praise God chooses to put in us and to call forth from us.

*What a church we would be* if we resolved to do that, and did it, if we took this as our joyful opportunity, made possible for us because of God's great purposeful love!

How marvelously would God be glorified!  
How truly would Christ be honored!  
How excellently would we celebrate Christmas!

Friends, know that we, together, are God's garden,

planted to live righteously,  
planted to seek justice,  
planted to be seen and enjoyed by others,

a *public* garden, in which more and more we become those in whose hearts

and minds  
and words  
and deeds

Jesus may rightly find his dwelling and receive his glory.