

A Space for All Seasons

A Meditation on the occasion of the Dedication of the Memorial Gardens
Urbandale United Church of Christ

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Sunday, 7 September 2008

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The Hebrew sacred stories of creation, told primarily in Genesis 1 and 2, provide at least two different ways of imagining how all “this” began. In the first, “the earth was a formless void,” a hovering chaos held—suspended—gently in the palm of God. The Cosmic Creative will was expressed in a voice: “God said, let there be...”—the Divine called order from the messy stew. A rough hewn period of “six days” and a Sabbath rest were invoked from the vast nothingness.

In Genesis 2, another story is told; and in this tale, God digs in the dirt. God creates a garden—Eden—and scoops up a lump of clay. This pericope was one of the favorite stories of my Hebrew Bible professor—the great-and-wonderful, The Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Platt. And while I won’t be able to fully communicate it quite as well as she, her interpretation of Genesis 2 was that God took the dirt—red clay—and fashioned a human form—poking two holes for the nostrils—and breathed the breath of God, the spirit of life, into the clay doll and it—we—became animated. God held us and looked upon us with absolute delight—pure joy. We are, in Dr. Platt’s rendering of the ancient myth, God’s “red clay, squishy baby.” It is as brilliant a metaphor as I can conjure for imaging our genesis—our beginning—our life and place in the universe. We are God’s beloved, formed from the earth; God’s breath and earth’s red clay are our parents, providers, and caretakers.

And there are times when the chaos threatens to overwhelm us and still other periods when we feel expelled from the garden of God’s care. And our souls long for the quiet center. We hunger for home. I suspect that for as long as humans have been able to find some harmony with nature, we have been creating and tending gardens—and they have been tending us. Vegetable gardens primarily feed our bodies; gardens, as set-aside sacred space, will tend our souls. For if, indeed, we are creatures of the earth, then we have both a physical and spiritual connection to the soil. Our most ancient and modern liturgies affirm, at the time of our death, that we are “dust and to dust we shall return.” We must be careful, however, of assuming a separation in the time and space of our living.

By an act of this congregation, we have set aside a portion of the space trusted to our care. It is a quiet space for us to reconnect with our true nature—to remember who and whose we are. It is also a space that can receive our cremains, the ashes of our bodies, as we are released from this

life to life eternal. The garden will require up keep and tending; but the sacred space will tend and renew us in return.

The plants and other vegetation in the garden all have their own season—and so do we. The seeds buried in the ground—covered in darkness—will need to “let go” and simultaneously send roots to the depths and push through the sod to the sunlight. There will be seasons of lush blossoms and months of slumber, waiting for spring’s promise. It is a rhythm that we know—internally as well as seasonally.

And the garden will need to be watered, just like us. It has become a common practice in this worshipping community that whenever one of our Dear Ones is baptized, we are all invited to “remember our baptism, and be grateful.” It is a reminder that we are all always in God’s care and love—God is with us and nurtures us. As we dedicate a portion of our space to be and become a Memorial Garden, as we care for it and in turn receive its nurture and, when so requested, it receives our cremains, let us remember our baptism, and be grateful. Let us remember that God holds us tenderly—in times of chaos and creation. Let us remember that we are beloved children of God made from “sacred stuff” of this earth. In the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah:

*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.*

~ Isaiah 58:11

Indeed, God will continue to be ever-present with us and this Memorial Garden can be a sacred space for all the seasons of our planet and of our lives.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

RESPONSIVE DEDICATION OF THE MEMORIAL GARDENS

Pastor: Beloved Community of God, I ask you to affirm your belief and awareness that you are Beloved Children of God and are made from the “sacred stuffs” of this planet.

All: We confess that we belong to God, we live in God’s world, and that we are wonderfully made from God’s hands from the “red clay” of the earth.

Pastor: I ask you to reaffirm your desire to set aside a portion of the space that is trusted to your care as a Memorial Garden.

All: We acknowledge that our “property” is a trust from God. We are responsible to be good stewards and to live in covenant with each other and with the grounds. We reaffirm our desire to set aside a portion of our sacred space as a Memorial Garden.

Pastor: And how shall you use it?

All: It shall be a garden where we can find a quiet center in the many seasons of our lives. It will hold our prayers, questions, and meditations. It can be a place of retreat from the hurriedness of daily living. It will be a window to witness the seasons and changes of the planet. And, under the appropriate guidelines affirmed by our Leadership Team, it will be a space to return our cremains to the earth.

Pastor: I have born witness to your confession of faith, I have heard your intentions to set this space aside, and I affirm your engagement in the pilgrimage of seasons and life. As such, do you promise to care for and maintain this Memorial Garden for as long as this community of faith desires it to be such?

All: We do so promise. And if the time comes to release the grounds from this purpose, we will do so intentionally and with tenderness.

Pastor: I hear and affirm your desires and your promises. I invite you to join your hearts in prayer as we dedicate the Memorial Garden. Following the prayer, any who wish to do so, may process quietly outside and scoop some water and add their blessing and dedication to the space. The water will be maintained until after the worship services on Sunday, September 14th. You may engage this ritual as often as you like.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION FOR THE MEMORIAL GARDEN

Creating God, when the Earth was a formless void of hovering chaos, you held it gently in your hands and called order out of the disharmonious disarray. And you are still holding this sphere.

God of artistry and craft, you have soiled yourself in red clay and fashioned us in your image. Our animated spirits are the winds of time and the breath of all life. And you are still breathing on us and reshaping us to your design.

Welcoming God, our truest home is in your care. When our spiritual ancestors outgrew the Garden of Eden, you placed a flaming sword at its entrance arbor so that we might depart that space and continue our pilgrimage of growth. And you went them and us.

On this solemn occasion, we pause to remember your craft, care, and creativity... (silence).

Trusting One, you have entrusted a portion of your Creation to our care. We have named the community Urbandale United Church of Christ and for several generations we have used it for worship, for community building, and as a space for justice and peace making. Under your guidance, it is the will of this congregation that we set a plot of these grounds aside to be and become a Memorial Garden. We dedicate this space:

- Be a retreat from the chaos of daily living;
- To be a harbor to embrace questions and beauty;
- To be a refuge to observe the seasons of climate and of our living;
- And as holy ground to receive the cremains as we offer our bodies back to the earth and our souls to life eternal.

May we tend it well and open ourselves to the blessings it offers in return. May we hold true to the promises of stewardship we have made this day. May we be aware of your graciousness offered and affirmed by this water. May we remember our baptism and be grateful as we seek to live more fully into the promise that is ours as your Beloved Children.

We pray all this in the name of our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer. Amen.