



# SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Out in Two Rivers Park there are these beautiful gardens. Anyone can rent a plot of that fertile river soil there and fence off their own garden. And let me tell you that there are some serious gardeners out there. Whenever I am out that way I wind through the rows and rows of gardens. Depending on the season you can see pepper plants, tomatoes, sunflowers that shoot up to the sky, melons, okra. Just beautiful plants everywhere, you can smell the rich soil, hear the bugs. And inevitably walking through the gardens it hits me, "I'm gonna start a garden."

So, I go out and get potting soil, and pick out my plants with the little biodegradable containers, rosemary, tomatoes, jalapeños, and bell peppers. You know, stuff I can cook with later. I set up the containers, and get everything planted and watered. And things go well for about a week or two. Then spring starts to turn into summer, the days get longer and hot, life gets occupied with other things and I forget about my little garden on my patio. Inevitably, I'll walk out on the porch and see the forgotten container all dried up and withered. I'm a terrible gardener. I like the idea of the garden but when it comes to tending the garden, the part in between planting it and harvesting. The part in the mean-time. I get distracted or lose interest.

Whether a garden succeeds or fails, all depends on if it is tended to. Tending, those small actions that are a combination of noticing, caring, and hoping. Tending is going and

checking on the plants, pulling out the weeds, making sure the plants are getting enough sun but not too much sun, enough water but not too much water, keeping an eye out for pests that could destroy the plant. Those little day to day things where you can't tell if the plant is growing between one day to another but you have hope that it is.

I know some people who are really good gardeners. And they all seem to have some things in common. Whenever you are around a good gardener and in their garden with them, they always seem to be scanning, noticing the plants, and pulling off dead leaves, or weeds, or doing something to it. Not large things just little acts of care. They are good at tending the plants.

We are at the start of the Third week of Lent and our SSJE Mark of Love that we are focusing on this upcoming week is Tend. We are in the garden God planted in that meantime. Our time, here and now, is not for planting in God's garden or for harvesting God's garden, but tending God's garden. While we all may not all have green thumbs, we are all called and equipped by Christ through our baptism to be excellent tenders of God's garden.

We can learn lessons from those good at gardening physical gardens. Good gardeners first and foremost pay attention to and notice the little things. They can sense the minute changes from day to day and act on what's best for the plant. After noticing, they care for the plant. They provide the conditions for the individual plants to do their best. That might mean aggressive weeding and watering for some plants and it might mean leaving other plants alone. Whatever the decision is they are doing it out of great care for the plant. Finally, good gardeners have a great deal of hope. Plants take time and you can't really tell from one day to the next if the tending is working. But they all have a hope for where the garden is going and that motivates them to keep on tending.

We have to be good tenders of God's garden here and now. We have to notice. It's so easy to slip in that mindset of being preoccupied with ourselves, getting caught up in the changes and chances, the anxieties and joys of our own lives, that we don't even notice God's garden, let alone tend to it. We let it dry out and shrivel up. We let weeds and pests creep in, weeds of injustice and severe inequality, pests of greed, anger, and fear. As good gardeners of God's garden we first have to notice. Notice by listening; by taking everything in. Notice where God's love is flowing and moving throughout this world and in our communities. Notice where our sin has disrupted that flow, where healing is needed, where justice is needed, where mercy is needed.

To be a good gardener in God's garden we need to humbly take an honest account of the state of the garden and notice it. And then act with care and compassion. Be present in the situation and respond to it according to God's love. Knowing that God's love has already gone before. We are not here to plant or harvest, God has taken care of that. We are here to tend, to find God's love already present and flowing throughout the world and through the small caring acts of tending, provided conditions where that love can thrive.

Finally, good gardeners of God's garden do all of this in hope. Paul was encouraging a bunch of tenders of God's garden in Rome in today's Epistle. "We boast in our hope . . . hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." His words still ring true to all God's gardeners today, 2000 years later. For all the suffering there is in this world, there is still a greater hope, the greatest hope, the hope of the resurrection. The faith that things which are dead now no longer end in death, but in life. New life.

So, like those expert gardeners out in the park, go and fence plot of God's garden. Feel that rich soil teeming with God's love that just needs some tending to make the conditions right for flourishing. Find your part of the garden that you are being called to tend. Maybe its feeding the hungry. Maybe it's being a voice for and caring for the environment. Visiting prisoners. Helping the homeless. Caring for the sick or lonely. Providing education. Whatever it is, it does not have to be a great big act. A garden gets tended by the accumulation of small caring acts. These small acts of tending build and build upon each other until the love of God flowing in that soil burst through as evidence of the hope that we all act on. And the risen Christ is revealed through our actions of love and the kingdom of God is shown forth from a garden well-tended.