

The Ephemeral Garden

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June 18, 2023

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To illustrate our scriptures today, the title of my message is called the Ephemeral Garden. To begin, I'd like to share three stories from history of people who planted seeds in this Ephemeral Garden.

The first of these stories dates back to 1525, the birth year of Hiawatha, the great Mohawk Indian chief and father of seven daughters. Legends tell us that Hiawatha had many enemies. One of them made advancements towards Hiawatha's daughters. Each girl refused the enemy, and, in return, he killed Hiawatha's daughters, one by one. Devastated, Hiawatha fled to the forest. But, while he was grieving, Hiawatha met a great prophet who healed his pain, and then convinced Hiawatha to go out and spread peace among the tribes. This is how it came to be that Hiawatha convinced the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas to unite as the great Iroquois Nation.

Another seed was planted in the Ephemeral Garden on June 19, 1865, when the people of Texas were informed that a proclamation from the President of the United States, General order No. 3, declared that more than 250,000 slaves to be free. The order, read by Union Army General, Gordon Granger, stated, "this involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor." This event occurred two months after the surrender of General Robert E. Lee, April 9, 1865, and two-and-a-half years after announcement of Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862.

Lastly, let's consider the seeds planted right here in Machias when on June 12, 1775, Machias patriots took arms against their British oppressor. An unknown writer recorded, "examining their equipments of warfare, there were found to be only a few charges of powder and ball, for twenty fowling-pieces, thirteen pitchforks, ten or twelve axes. Most of the powder and balls were on board of O'Brien's vessel, the Unity. No circumstance, could more strikingly exhibit the reckless bravery of this little band than that it should have been without an acknowledged leader until they were in sight of the enemy, when O'Brien was chosen commander by unanimous consent." This was the Battle of the Margareta, the first surrender of a naval flag by the British Crown, occurring five days before Bunker Hill, and more than a year before the reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.

I read about these particular moments in our country's history because we take time today to commemorate Father's Day, Juneteenth, and the Battle of the Margareta. But I also chose them too because they are important reminders of how seeds are planted in God's Ephemeral Garden, the fruits of which we cannot see, or feel, or taste—at least not for a very long time. We have a lot to learn from Hiawatha, who surely did not expect his grief would one day bear the fruits of peace. Nor did hundreds of thousands of enslaved human beings ever imagine that freedom and

human rights could be born of their suffering and perseverance. And I think our feisty Centre Street ancestors can teach us a thing or two about perseverance too.

The point is, we don't always know when we begin a thing, how it's going to turn out. We can throw down a lot of seed, but they do not always survive and grow. And yet, despite sometimes impossible odds, sometimes they do. Our son, Neil learned this lesson very young and even wrote a book about it. More on his book in a minute. But first, a little about Neil, who is now 33 years old. As a child, Neil could be, how should I say it? Challenging? Actually, we had two challenging, a.k.a. ADHD boys. David, who is 43 years old was challenging too...and still is, but that's another story for another time. Anyhow, back to Neil. On one particularly trying, hot summer day when Neil was about seven years old, it was getting later and later. It was hot and muggy. We were exhausted and Neil would not, I mean WOULD NOT settle down. Would not stop picking on his brother, Kyle. Running up and down the stairs. Screaming at the top of his lungs. You get the picture. So finally, around midnight, Dad was just done. Alan yelled again for Neil to go to bed, punctuating the command by slamming the door shut. But soon the door flew open, and Neil screamed louder standing at the top of the stairs before returning to the bedroom to once again bounce up and down, triumphantly, on the bed. Truly beyond patience now, Alan ran back upstairs and found Neil still testing the bed springs. Giddy with victory, the unassailable child was flushed, and sweaty from all of his antics, still jumping, still screaming, and dressed now in nothing but his underwear and socks. Alan, who was exasperated, completely out of ammunition, and sputtering defeat, looked at Neil, and shouted, "For God's sake, Neil, take off those socks!!! Are you trying to kill yourself?!"

Alan's nonsensical directive was met with confusion, but the jumping and screaming did stop. Needless to say, outside the family, Neil wasn't always well received, although his charm did sometimes make conquests. Neil got to thinking about that. So, around the time of the sock incident, he wrote a book explaining how some people like you, and some people don't. The boys used to draw and color pictures on reams of paper and write page after page of elaborate stories. Alan then carefully collated and stapled together their DIY comic books. The protagonist in one of Neil's books was a penguin, Pecky the Penguin. Like Neil, Pecky was learning the hard way that some people liked him, and some—eh, not so much. The story alternated from page to page, with Pecky having some good encounters with other penguins, and some not so good. By the end of the book, Pecky wisely concluded, "Some people say YAY! And some people say, NO!"

Three decades later, Pecky is still part of our family lore. Whenever someone doesn't agree with one of us, you'll often hear us proclaim in unison, "well, some people say, YAY and some people say, NO!" If you think about it, Pecky's philosophy kind of works.

Throughout history, there have always been—and *always* will be—people opposing us, fighting us, denying us, or others, justice, what is right and good. There will always be hate, and anger, and violence. We've heard about a few of those instances today—Hiawatha, enslaved black people, the Machias rebels. They all knew and bore that painful truth. Jesus even carried that truth to the cross. God certainly understands better than anyone. So, why does God tell us to persist? Why do we keep being sent into the fray to spread God's good word of Love thy

Neighbor? Why does God let us keep risking NO instead of YAY? In Matthew 9:35, Jesus tells us...

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few."

And so, the disciples went out into the villages to spread God's good words, to spread the seeds of love, and peace, and human rights. In Luke we learn how God prepared the disciples to recognize YAY and NO.

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

Still, spreading God's message doesn't quite work the same way today that it did in the time of the disciples. I mean, how many of us are out walking from village to village, from town to town, talking to folks, and planting the seeds of God's love. Heck, since Covid, in our new cyberworld of Zoom and text, talking with people face to face even down the street can be rare. So, where is the town? Where is the garden? Where are we supposed to sow those seeds? Well, the truth is, we actually travel more today than ever before. We just aren't strapping on sandals to do it. We now carry God's word via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok.

Although he's been mocked for it, Mark Zuckerberg figured this out. He jumped on the idea of cyber communities, by rebranding Facebook as Meta. Based on the sci-fi term metaverse, Zuckerberg said Meta describes his vision for working and playing in a virtual world. This is true, I think. We update family about what we are doing, celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and weddings. We share recipes, photos, and LOTS of kitty and puppy videos. We even grieve in the cyberworld. But Meta is also our new, Ephemeral Garden. It's where we plant seeds of love and justice and pray for peace, with every post and picture and meme. Okay, let's be honest here. How's that working out for you? The Meta Garden is certainly no Garden of Eden. Definitely not since the political scene turned ugly. Really ugly. And people took sides. Even some of our loved ones dug their heels deeper and deeper into hate. Inconceivably, many of us have lost friends and family members trying to share God's message of love and justice. Just trying to oppose hate, prejudice, and violence... Remember the farmer in Luke 1?

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on...

God does understand that although we are spreading God's words of love and peace—Love thy neighbor as thyself. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—that we will not always be well received. But in Matthew 10:8 God tells us to go into the garden anyway.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions, “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message The kingdom of heaven has come near... If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town, and shake the dust off your feet.”

With social media, we may not be physically traveling in the world, and in the meta, Ephemeral Garden we may not be sowing seeds in real soil. But as Jesus tells us,

“The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”

Just as Hiawatha persevered for peace. Just as Black Americans persevered for human rights. Just as the Machias rebels persevered for freedom. None of them knew when they began if anything they did would matter. If their words and deeds would eventually bear fruit. Standing your ground on social media in the Cyberworld to plant seeds of reason and righteousness against hateful, racist, and homophobic people, might not feel as monumental as the actions of the intrepid predecessors we’re honoring today. And, sadly, we all know from history, our own experiences—as well as from scripture—that sometimes those seeds get trampled. Still, God reminds us, time and again that every seed of love holds the possibility of a bountiful harvest. So go, sow the seeds of Divine love. As Jesus tells us, *“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”* If they refuse? Well, Jesus tells us don’t waste your breath. Don’t stay where the good news is not wanted. Go, *click* away. Only God knows if those seeds of love will wither or if they’ll eventually yield a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

Pecky understood this. Some people will say YAY. And some will say NO.