

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Over this past summer, I have had this beautiful pot of New Guinea Impatience on my front porch to enjoy. They have bloomed and bloomed. They have been very forgiving when I have not watered them as regularly as I should. And they have brought a wonderful spot of color to the front of my house. As it became clear that the weather was ready to turn colder, I decided that I would bring this plant inside and keep it over the winter. It was a gift from our newest class of Stephen Ministers and something just didn't seem right about abandoning this gift and letting it shrivel up and die. So I brought the impatience in.

I tried to place it in a comfortable spot. I have been faithful at watering it and talking to it...perhaps more honestly pleading with it to live as it drops leaves in shock to its new environment and tries to figure out a way to adapt. I hope it will make it. I hope it is not doomed because of the clumsy gardener who is trying to care for it and keep it alive. I just pray that it can hang on despite me and be rewarded in the spring by taking its place once again on my front porch.

There's a big difference between good gardeners and me. Those of you who are, you really know your plants. You know what they need to thrive. You know all that information that comes on that little plastic tab stuck in the pot: Full sun or partial shade, plant six inches apart and so many inches deep, needs moist soil or soil that drains well, requires soil with a certain pH.

And there are all those secrets that us planting novices may not know or do as well as you do: pinch off the spent buds and it will flower more, prune the azaleas after they bloom, spray this on the roses and the beetles will stay away, when to repot or when to separate bulbs, when to add nutrients to the soil, when to bring them inside or when to cover them up to prevent damage from the cold.

As you good gardeners do these things to care for your plants,
they grow and blossom and are beautiful to behold. Your gardens
teem with life. The plants are as they were meant to be.
They reflect the glory of the God who made them so and the faithful
and tender care of the gardener who has nurtured them to life.
If a plant is not thriving, you move it to a better spot or feed it
or trim back the surrounding plants so that it has more room
to grow. You stake it or prune it or wind it on a trellis
to have it grow in the direction of your choosing.
You care for it with patience and take great joy
at seeing it grow and mature into a beautiful plant.

What would happen one day if the plants in your boxes and flowerbeds
decided that they wanted to do things their own way. They appreciate
your expertise and all that, but they would like a little more control
of their lives. After all this is their flowerbed and they have some
dreams and ideas of their own that they would like to try.

The hostas decide that they are tired of always being forgotten
in the shadows & pull up their roots & plant themselves in the full sun.
The tomato plants talk among themselves and decide that
when it comes to manure, more is better & give themselves
a second helping. When the good gardener comes out
and covers up the budding azaleas right before a cool spring night,
the azaleas decide that they are more manly and tough
than the gardener thinks they are and cast off the covering
placed on them to shield them from the frost.

The day lilies decide that they are God's gift to the flowerbed
and start crowding out the hyacinths and tulips. After all,
the day lilies are more beautiful and sure bloom a lot longer
than those weak bulbs could ever think of blooming.
It wouldn't take long to see what kind of mess you would have
on your hands. Plants with their own free will to choose and make

life decisions based on their own desires would end in chaos and diminished life. Hostas shriveled in the hot sun, burnt up tomato plants, blistered azalea buds, oppressed hyacinths and tulips eeking out an existence. You would hope that the plants would realize at some point that things weren't going so well; that they would cry out to the gardener and realize that they had made a mistake.

You would hope that they would remember back to what good and loving care the gardener tended to them; how he faithfully looked after their needs, shielded them from danger, and gave them the ability to grow and flower like they were intended to from the beginning. Hopefully they would realize that their lives all on their own were peaked and wilted and diminished. Hopefully they would not forget the good gardener and turn away from his care for good.

The good gardener picks up you & me and admires how beautiful God has made us to be and he smiles. He pulls out that plastic tab from the soil in which we are planted. It is the new covenant spoken of in Jeremiah today. For us it reads: You belong to Jesus, the good gardener, and in his garden you will forever grow.

You will know this gardener's loving care all the days of your life. Under his tender care, you will grow and blossom and be the beautiful plant I have made you to be. Know the Lord and never from him depart.

Jesus looks at you and knows you better than you know yourself. He places you in the perfect spot he has picked out for you with just enough of his sunshine. He positions you in the soil of his holy word because he knows that his words will give you life. From them you will be well fed. He waters you daily in the waters of baptism, washing away your sin and helping you to put down your roots in him deep. He tends to you as you grow guiding your growth and pruning you delighting in your progress. And then when you burst into bloom he has placed

the right plants around you so that together you are even more beautiful than you could possibly be standing on your own.

Grace is the gift of being a living, breathing plant in Jesus' garden. It is knowing the Lord and his tender care for you. It is being able to recognize that everything around you is a gift from Jesus to enable you to grow according to his design. From where you are rooted or placed in life, to whether you are extroverted or introverted or an artist or a teacher or an engineer or a good listener or a good cook, to how you have been pruned and directed by Jesus to grow. All of it is love and grace.

The only reason you are alive, much less that you thrive or blossom at all is because of Jesus. If he did not show you any care at all, how long do you think you would last? How long can a plant survive without sunshine or water or soil? None of us can make it on our own. The reason we have life, abundant life; the reason that we have life now and life in the world to come is because we have a good gardener. Jesus has been faithful to his Father and faithful to us. He first showed that by his willingness to suffer death on the cross and then defeat death by rising from the dead three days later. And he continues to show that faithfulness by loving us and teaching us to know and follow him.

Our job, our vocation in life, is to trust that Jesus knows what he is doing with us and our lives. We have to trust Jesus and not second-guess our Lord. We're not always going to know why he wants to trim back our branches on one side or pull out the bulbs in front of us. Jesus does not stop and show us the full schematic of the flowerbed and how it will all come together once the spring and summer arrive. We have to trust and cooperate / co-operate with our Lord rather than trying to take control ourselves. We rely on Jesus and work alongside him in his plan.

I know that is often really hard to do, but speaking for myself, the times that I have been able to let go and to trust God with what he is doing with my life have been the times when I have been the most free. When I am there and not grabbing for control, I am free to enjoy who God has made me to be. I realize the beauty and the gift of being the person that is described on the plastic tab stuck down in my soil. I don't have to pretend to be a sunflower if I am truly a brown-eyed susan.

I can better accept my circumstances in life knowing that Jesus knows what nourishment I need even better than I do.

I don't get quite as bent out of shape over some of the people God has planted next to me either. They must be there for a reason and Jesus will either make a beautiful flower arrangement out of us or eventually move one of us to a better spot.

When I let Jesus have control I don't have to fear if I'll see enough sunlight or dry up from thirst. For God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the Dow dips below 9000 and our 401k shrivels before our eyes, though our relationships have turned into an angry sea or we fear the outcomes of the elections or our health fades or our job has blown away overseas.

Be still and know that I am God.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Jesus is the good gardener; we can trust his tender care.