

Grace and peace to you from God and the Holy Spirit, and from Jesus Christ, who, together with Moses and the prophets, has given us the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.

My friend Sara has a wild yard. And I do mean... wild.

She moved into her quiet, suburban neighborhood some years ago, and to her neighbor's dismay... she didn't mow the lawn.

It's the kind of yard you might expect to see out in the country... way out... around an abandoned house... but certainly not in her manicured neighborhood...

And oh my goodness, did it cause an uproar!

The neighbors couldn't understand why she kept such an untidy lawn, and they glared out their living room windows, casting judgment on her... and filed complaints with the city.

She had to petition for the right to let the grass and dandelions grow... and for the leaves to fall where the wind blew... and let them stay there.

She asked her neighbors... to trust the process... And she won!

...well, sort of... I believe they struck a deal that if she kept the area around the front clear, she could do what she wished with the rest, which was fine... because her backyard is massive.

The first year, it was just a mess... chaos everywhere! Even the grass was confused.

But then... after about a year or so had gone by... after the neighbors had mostly made their peace with my friend Sara's "process..."

They noticed something they hadn't seen in years... one warm summer evening... they saw... Fireflies! ...Lightning Bugs!

Little glowing lights, twinkling, and blinking, and flying around... and the neighbors marveled! ...One of Sara's neighbors told her that she hadn't seen fireflies since she was a child!

How extraordinary and delightful!

...and once they noticed the fireflies, well then... then they started noticing other little things.

They noticed all the butterflies that would stop and visit Sara's wild yard. Beautiful and colorful, graceful butterflies... floating all around.

They noticed that a fox had moved into the grove of trees in her backyard, and it was safe and secure enough for it to have little fox pups.

And the trees! Even the trees seemed fuller... brighter... like they could finally breathe.

And the grass... the grass that was so confused...well, it was no longer just plain grass... but a blanket of all different shades of green, full, tall, and strong, and filled with wildflowers.

...and of course, happy, buzzy bees, gathering pollen.

My friend Sara's wild yard... was no longer a yard... it was a garden, in the most natural sense of the word.

It still required some tending... a bit of care here and there, but her care was directed toward increasing the garden's habitability for the diversity of plants and creatures that now lived there, including ...herself.

And she tends this garden because the fireflies, and the butterflies, and the bees, and the family of foxes... *need this space*...

They are all important... all the little creatures that might go unnoticed by some and considered a nuisance by others... all connected to each other, and connected to Sara and her family... in the great web of God's Creation.

Sara's garden is the resource she has available to share with her neighbors, both human and otherwise, and in doing so, she is helping to heal the small sliver of God's beautiful kingdom, right where she stands.

And... her wild and full garden brings her joy!

Now... you may be asking... why am I talking about natural gardens in suburban neighborhoods... after hearing a gospel text that is clearly about money?

Well! I'm so glad you asked!

And you're right... this text today is about money... but ultimately... ultimately, it's about relationships... and connection.

Remember our text from last week about the rich man and his shrewd manager? Jesus ends that parable with the mic-drop statement... "You cannot serve both God and wealth... or rather... Mammon."

And the Pharisees are indignant... they like their wealth and comfort, and they scoff at Jesus and ridicule him for challenging them in this way.

And so Jesus doubles down... and tells the Pharisees this next parable that we heard today. Today's text is part of the larger conversation that we've been in now for three weeks.

And yes... Jesus is talking about money again... Jesus talks about money a lot, actually... and what our responsibility is when we have an abundance of resources.

But, I feel like I hit that point really hard last week, so this week, I wanted to dig into the why... *why* is it so important... that we take Jesus at his word?

So, this parable we have today... it's a fable, really... Jesus is not suddenly giving us a description of heaven and hell... but he is telling a cautionary tale and drawing from the imagery of Greek mythology to do so.

And in this tale, the rich man was so caught up in his own perceived earthly importance... that he never really noticed poor Lazarus, who lay at his gate, covered in sores.

He saw him, of course, but the shock of his need was no longer... shocking.

The rich man even knew his name was Lazarus... and yet, day after day, while the rich man feasted sumptuously, poor Lazarus lay there starving.

The chasm between them... the chasm that becomes a real barrier in the place of the dead... *was self-imposed by the rich man during his life.*

And then... of course... they both die... and the rich man, in his agony, asks Abraham to send Lazarus to serve him... and to serve his brothers.

Even in death, the rich man thinks he deserves something better on account of his wealth.

Even in death, the rich man cannot recognize that they are both children of Abraham... they are connected... they are brothers through the great web of God's Creation.

As long as the rich man is unable to see poor Lazarus as a brother, who is worthy of life and love and care, and connected to him through God... *as long as the rich man is unable to see this... he will remain in the place of the dead.*

Jesus is, once again, flipping everything upside down. Jesus is challenging the idea that if you have money, you must be more valuable and loved by God.

This *terrible* idea is one that is still prevalent today... the idea that those who have earthly treasure are more blessed... more favored and loved by God...

...and that those who are poor must have done something to deserve their lot in life.

And while it is true, that our individual choices in life do have some bearing on what we experience...

This way of thinking conveniently absolves us of any responsibility toward those who have not fared as well as we have...

And it is directly contrary... to what God has been trying to get us to understand since the time of Moses.

We have free will, yes, but we are all... also part of larger systems beyond our individual control.

Like the butterflies and bees who find their food sources and habitats either covered in chemicals or gone... or the fireflies whose eggs get swept away in the fall clean-up... some things are beyond our control.

We don't know why Lazarus was forced to beg at the rich man's gate... but we know that the chasm between them was very real... as real as it is in our world today.

And yet... *we know*... that Jesus came to bring good news to the poor and to liberate the oppressed.

Over and over, Jesus preaches that his ministry was not to engage in personal relationships with individuals as their Lord and savior... but to show us that we are connected! ...that our true flourishing is caught up with our neighbors!

Jesus came to show us that we belong to each other, and we have a responsibility to each other... *each according to what we have been given.*

Jesus came to show us that his ministry of breaking the chains of oppression means to break the systems that perpetuate that oppression.

Jesus' ministry requires us, as followers, to engage and embrace this work *that God is doing through us*.

We belong to each other, and Jesus desires to give us the kingdom... to show us the way to the kingdom of heaven.

And God's kingdom... well, it looks like a beloved community of neighborly care and love, in both abstract and concrete ways.

It comes from shared respect and dignity... it comes from equality in both word and deed.

It comes from the intentionality of really *seeing* our neighbors who are in need, instead of passing them by and wondering why they don't just get a job.

And Jesus... he was doubling down on the teachings of Moses and the prophets, *because through them, God had already shown us the way to this beautiful kingdom...*

This beautiful kingdom of God... is at hand... heaven is being formed here! Being formed, more and more, as we conform our lives to the way of Christ!

The kingdom of God... is not a reward for checking all the boxes during your life... It's not a cookie you get for being a good kid.

The kingdom of God is a garden... it's a garden that needs tending... a garden that needs the space and freedom to grow and support the full diversity of life...

The kingdom of God is a garden that honors all life as sacred.

Friends, we are here now, in this garden... and Jesus longs for us to recognize that we have a responsibility to tend this garden, and that when we do... we will flourish together.

Is it perfect? NO!... not by a long shot.

But let's trust the process... let's keep showing up for our neighbors, and... let our neighbors show up for us...

Let's look into the eyes of those who are passed by, those who are poor and begging... those who society would like to forget... and recognize them as our kin, and honor God's Spirit within them...

Let's recognize that all people are our siblings and celebrate their value and worth... and delight in all the ways we are privileged to participate in God's great web of creation.

For I know this... God has given us the instruction and the tools we need to tend this garden... to deconstruct the chasm that isolates and sterilizes our world.

And I trust God's process... and I trust God's promise... that we are being called into God's life-changing and transformative ministry.

I'll be honest... I don't think that we will see it fully bloom in our lifetimes, but I know... that when I live according to God's word... and I pay attention, I see fireflies dancing all around in this garden, and that gives me hope.

Amen.