

SERMON SERIES

*Making Our Garden Grow*

SERMON TITLE

“And it was good” (Genesis 1:9-13)

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This week begins a summer Sermon series inspired by the findings and recommendations of our Long-range Planning Ministry Team at Meadowbrook. The series is called *Making Our Garden Grow*, centering on how we can embrace renewal through church revitalization. Each week we will explore how the Bible speaks into the areas identified by our Long-range team, including the 4 top categories the team believes to impact the future health of our local church: Increase Attendance and Participation, Reach Young Adults, Education on Forecasted Financial Status, and Openness to Change. Today, we explore Openness to Change.

Friends, as we see in our passage from Genesis, creation is inherently good and blessed. God has made things good. But as is perhaps no surprise, there are bumps in the road along the way. Situations and circumstances change and adapt over time. We might even say that they change whether we like it or not, or if we notice it or not. The guiding question I’d offer for us this morning has more to do with how we respond to such a reality than whether it exists: how can we embrace renewal together through times of change in order to foster the flourishing of our faith community?

Let’s start with another question. Have people always made the world a better place? Tough question, isn’t it? But one worth asking ourselves from time to time, especially since change occurs around us. It implies a few important things. First, there was a time when we were not (people, that is). To my knowledge, limited as it is, large religious traditions, from the ancient world to the present, have not advocated for humankind being present at the creation of the world. Jesus, yes; but people, no. Religion and science show that people came after. God put many things into place, working through ways which may be hard for us to imagine, let alone visualize. So since we did come after, we can ask ourselves what we have done to improve things. After all, seeing how we did not come first, we ourselves *are* change. Our cities are change. Our country; the jobs we hold; our families; the technology we use and the medicine or education we receive; even our church is change.

Meadowbrook grew out of Bushnell Congregational Church, which itself was planted at one time as new. Congregationalism was once a change. My ability to be your pastor would not have existed a few hundred years ago, let alone a thousand. You might say that most of our present life is comprised of changes that have taken place over time.

In our passage from very early in the Book of Genesis, we learn that God created the world before us in a way that allowed for life not only to exist, but to flourish and self-perpetuate (plants with the seeds already inside them to reproduce). This is an amazing truth. We often think life begins and ends with just us, people; or at least we act that way at times. But God made the beautiful world able to reproduce even before we entered the scene, and of high importance for us to consider today: God made it this way and saw that it was good.

What does it mean for us as human beings to acknowledge that things were good even before us? Certainly we can see that we don't need to personally be present for something to have worth or beauty. Take the flowers, for example. They are beautiful even if we miss their bloom in a remote place.

So what does this say about God's intentions and what we have been created *into*? I've heard it said that change happens despite us. It's not so much whether or not we believe that change exists, because it always does, but rather, it is important to witness how we respond to that change in faithfulness.

Even if things have gone wrong, which they certainly have, isn't it amazing just to stop and think that God made something beautiful and good and *then* brought us to be in it? Talk about an awesome welcome. What if we approach welcome the same way, creating beautiful experience for others to enter into in our church, yes, but also in all of our daily interactions, the way we hold the door for someone behind us, greet one another, and the way we lovingly think of one another when we cast our votes in elections regardless of how diverse of our views may be from one another.

Church revitalization is about bringing a church from one place of health to a place of better health. But what defines health? What is "better" health when it comes to a faith community? Is it the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of its individual members?

How about the wellbeing of the community it serves, its home? How about the health of its finances or its long history of systems and how people behave toward one another? Is health defined by those who hold the power to heal, and if so, what does that mean for a faith community and who should wield that healing power? Is health found in our ability to heal the brokenness of our community or just in our ability to preserve ourselves and our traditions? If health is indeed good and God made the world good before human beings, then goodness precedes humanity, as does health, at least on a basic, primitive level, though it may be up for debate how much we've developed to the positive as a civilization.

In Congregationalism, we uphold the ministry of all believers; we are all of us ministers in the faith. We are a free people, yes, but we are only free in as much as we are responsible to what it is that we believe. I'd say that we are free *to* Jesus, not *from* Him. Free to interpret the scriptures. Free to see ourselves in The Story. Free from exclusion and free to participate. But we are also responsible to act on this freedom. This implies welcome, invitation, and it implies work, work that we do together *as* the church. Freedom without responsibility is not democracy, rather, it is chaos. And Congregationalism is not chaos. I'd like to say that democracy is also not chaos, that when we participate together, free and responsible, we make a significant and important difference in the world, the beautiful-already-good-before-us world that our great God has made, and that this difference matters. God made and introduced us to life from within goodness. It's what we do with it that matters most.

Friends, as we prayerfully consider our future together, may we not be tempted too much to focus on our freedom from that which we dislike as our responsibility to act on what needs to happen. Instead of fighting or fleeing the change we see in the world and in our own church, may we learn about it, discuss it together with open hearts, and be bold, be brave enough to keep our hearts aimed towards Jesus, who died on the cross for all our sakes and in so doing changed everything for all time. May we be open to the change Jesus calls us into and walk through the doors He has opened for us; for it is through Him that all good things come and continue to be.

May it be so to the glory of God. AMEN.