

Tending the Garden of God

1. Those of us of a certain age remember a movie called “The Karate Kid.” In it, a young boy is being mentored by an old Japanese master of karate...but he doesn’t realize what is going on. “Wax on, wax off”: became a cultural touchstone, a mark that you ‘got it.”
2. God has His own version of this: ‘Put on, put off.” I have a list of 78 of these in scripture. It reminds me of the advice experienced travelers give vacationers – take half as much stuff, twice as much money.
3. And that brings me to...the Garden of Eden. God put man and woman in a garden and, to Semitic peoples, paradise is a garden. In scripture, in their imaginings of the afterlife, and in their poetry and songs, paradise is a garden. (John the Revelator would imagine heaven in a different way but he is an outlier)
4. I want us to consider what it means to be a Christian. If you have been following my series on Mondays called “Who Told You...” you have heard about the cargo cults and how they are uncomfortably close to our religious practices. Sadly, adherence to outward moral behavior and religious ritual ends up being considered a sign of our faithfulness...instead of our inner heart’s dedication to our Lord.
5. For He is not just our Savior...He is our Lord. (this is when we move from Easter to the rest of our lives)
6. So God brings us into existence and places us in a Garden. Our sins are why we lost the Garden and our reengagement with God is our only way back to the Garden (Woodstock – got to get back to the garden, a song by Joni Mitchell)
7. Our souls are the garden of God, and we are the gardeners of those gardens. We are given a measure of free will and called to be aware and vigilant. In the Song of Songs, the young woman praises the man because he protects the garden: **Song of Songs 2:15**.
8. Let’s bring all of this together in one place: **Galatians 5:19-23**. Here is a good first place to think about “put off, put on” – what we should be growing and what weeds we need to watch for (in my childhood,

there was a time when my mother did not know what was a weed and what was an intentional plant...and that caused a problem when we pulled up the plants my father wanted to grow)

9. We are going to spend some weeks looking at the garden that God wants us to grow in our hearts and, therefore, in our communities of faith and then, yes, into the larger community of the cultures in which we live.
10. I do not want to pretend that Paul wrote these as a Mister Miyagi "Wax on, wax off" spreadsheet. That said, let's look at the first weed mentioned and the first flower mentioned: put off...sexual immorality, put on...love.
11. I often hear that our kids (or we, ourselves) "want too much."
Disagree: I think that our problem is that we settle for too little. We say we want love, but we settle for sex. Sex is important and wonderful and a gift from the hand of God...but its value is lost when it is divorced from love and commitment.
12. I don't want to be the cause of awkward conversations, so I will try to be careful here. I will try to keep this more PG than even PG-13, much less, R. Here's the thing: it is a fact that people rarely married for love throughout human history. They married because it was good for their families, for the larger community, etc. In the scripture, only one person is said to have married for love: Jacob loved Rebecca.
13. In our world, sex is considered a biological act no more important than breathing or eating or eliminating. The result is that people become disposable, of no more importance than a tissue, used once and then tossed and forgotten.
14. And so we have a society where people have all these ghosts in their heads that do not age. How can a real person compete? Our radio and TV ads are full of warnings about how men might be failing to be real men, how they are leaving partners unsatisfied. Paranoia, fear, and inadequacy become epidemics in our minds. Our private, secret gardens of love become despoiled, barren, places of fear instead of places of rest and peace.

15. In God's garden, sex is reserved for the garden that is inhabited by two and only two people. These two people are committed to each other. This is no extended engagement where each person reserves the right to walk away; this is for life (a review of the vows). So each time together in private in the garden is NOT an audition, a performance where you have to come up to a standard or you may be dismissed.
16. There can be sex without love. And there can be love without sex. But love is superior to anything and everything else. Love covers a multitude of sins (1st Peter 4:8). Love is selfless. Where love is, there is a garden, but there cannot be a garden, a paradise without love... for God is love.
17. **First Corinthians 13:1-13**. The greatest is love...but even it can be choked out if we allow weeds to grow. Be vigilant. Love one another, for God is love. **1st John 4:7; 5:4**.