

God the Gardener

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Dear brothers and sisters in faith in Jesus Christ!

Today I have something very special to tell you. These are two incidents that happened a long time ago, but which impressed me and left their mark on me – and which I was able to discover anew during these weeks!

Both incidents were told to me interestingly by two older gardeners. And both incidents reach into my family history. They have come close to me and they continue to have an effect in my heart and in my faith.

One day my mother's aged cousin visited me in the former pastor's house. I was happy about this, and I was eager to hear what the experienced man had to tell me. We sat in front of the house on a bench under the big old walnut tree in its cooling shade in the summer heat. It was already slightly approaching autumn, where the harvest fruits beckon.

By the way, his family name was "Engler", a beautiful name, probably a patronym (Greek πατρωνυμία) to Engel, respectively "Engelher".

And what did my mother's cousin have to tell me? He let me know that despite his many decades of life, his vitality was still there and he was enjoying good health. As a young pastor, I was particularly pleased about this, because such statements always have to do with hope for a long life toward God.

All at once he became a little thoughtful. He pointed out to me that he had worked all his life as a gardener in the neighboring village in the Rhine Valley of Sankt Gallen. When he was a young gardener, his pastor had said to him that when he made the garden, he saw God deeply in His handiwork. He never forgot that, and in his work with the flowers, plants and trees, with the earth and the meadows, with the water and the sun he always remembered that the work of His God was similar to what he was doing here.

And his work was similar to the work of His God! Isn't that something really great? I was amazed at this and I thought it was very beautiful. I was and I am also grateful that the related experienced man was all of a sudden talking about God, his Creator.

But what exactly the wise pastor had meant by this, I did not think about it any longer and never worked on it. I have never preached about it until now.

I only let this pastor know that my relative named "Engler" had never forgotten his words. It pleased the pastor that he could put this thought into the gardener's heart. There is much to be gained for faith and Life!

From then on, however, I paid attention to the symbolic connection of the professional life with the Life of faith. When I saw in the Zurich shopping center Sihlcity in the pre-Christmas season how the electricians carefully mounted the Christmas lights on the 60m high former factory chimney (fireplace) visible from afar, I called out to them with a slight smile: You are doing a privileged job!

Of course, they wanted to know why their job should be privileged; does the pastor perhaps want to take the mickey out of us?

With a somewhat more serious face, I confirmed as follows. But, with your work you always imitate God's first act of creation: "Let there be light!" (Genesis 1:3a) Then the faces of the workers lit up. They felt they understood themselves as electricians. And they answered with amazement: Yes exactly, that's what we do!

"And there was light." (Genesis 1:3b) Yes, that's what the Bible says: "And there was light." There was light because of God's work and there is light because of His work and the work of us humans who imitate Him and do as He did!

Similarly, I speak in each case with the bakers. I point out to them that a whole petition from the "Our Father", the only prayer Jesus gave us, refers to their profession: "Give us this day our daily bread" and that bread is one of the two elements of the Lord's Supper. They are always happy about this recognition and this faithful view of things, and I think they have carefully locked these phrases in their hearts and think about them in their daily work.

The second incident I would like to tell you about, again involved a gardener, and it also impressed and moved me. The Bible would say concerning such incidents: "And it happened" (Hebrew וַיִּהְיֶה pâga'). Yes, there again God entered my life quite abruptly and personally through something that happened and was told to me again by an experienced elderly gardener, and it again affected a family member of mine.

It happened a few years later. I met in the village of my origin again an experienced gardener. He had the same name as my paternal grandfather, who was named like me. So the two of them, the gardener and my grandfather, had the same first and last names. Both liked to sing songs and both sang them well. One was a gardener by profession, the other a bailiff. So they had very different professions. One worked outdoors in nature, the other indoors in his office. One worked for himself privately with his own company, the other worked for the public. But they liked to sing. Both sang in the same choir in the village, namely in the church choir.

I was pleased to meet this man when I was a young pastor. With shining eyes, he told me about the similarities he had with my grandfather: they had the same first and last name, and they both sang in the church choir. – And then it happened. – His face suddenly became more serious, his eyes looked deeper, yes, he seemed to see into the distance, as if into an eternity.

Suddenly he said to me, "You know, Jacob, one spring day when we were walking in the garden behind the house of your grandparents, your grandfather pointed with the finger of his right hand to the snowdrops and the crocuses, and he said, 'Look how these flowers sprout again after winter. How can you not believe in the resurrection of Christ?'"

He, the gardener, could never forget these two sentences of my grandfather. It was only two sentences, and he pointed to the sprouting flowers with the index finger of his right hand. Nothing more. My grandfather never spoke much. He was not a man of many words. But he liked to write. That was his profession.

With these two sentences in the gardener's heart, it soon became Eastertime, the feast of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ!

I always carried and still carry these two incidents in my heart and mind. But I always handled them carefully. I have never really worked on them until now, and I have rarely told about them, and I have never preached about them.

And why is that? After all, they are very beautiful experiences of faith and life, which, moreover, have to do with men of my family background!

I can tell you why. It has to do with my then very intellectually oriented theology studies. As soon as there was talk of such a thing, it was said suspiciously that the accusation of "natural theology" (Latin *theologia naturalis*) would come quickly. This seemed to stand against the theology of revelation. As if God could not also reveal Himself in His creation! As if God could not also talk to us humans through His creation!

The Bible is teeming with evidence that this is so. Moreover, the prophet Habakkuk (1:14) clearly promised: "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the sea is covered with waters." This promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, for the apostle Paul together with his brother Timothy wrote clearly to the believers in Christ in Colossians (1:16, 17): "In Jesus Christ all things were created, that are in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or powers or authorities: all things were created through Him and to Him; and He is before all, and all things have their foundation in Him!"

In his letter to the Romans (1:20), the apostle writes: "God's visible being, that is, His eternal power and God-head, is indeed clearly *seen* since the *creation* of the world, when viewed in works."

With greater clarity it cannot be said. It needs only our ears and eyes of the heart; it needs only our mind and will and emotions of the heart to see it and to *hear* His voice in it.

The authors of the Bible asked Him what He wanted to tell them. They received an answer. We today can also ask God what He wants to say to us now. He will also talk to us when we come to stillness and look to Him, the beginner and perfecter of faith, Jesus (Hebrews 12:2).

Impressively, as King Solomon writes in his Proverbs (30:24-27):



"Four animals are among the smallest on earth, yet they are wiser than the wise:
the ants are a weak race, yet they prepare their food in summer;
the cliff badgers are a race without strength, yet they build their dwellings in the rock;
the grasshoppers have no king, yet they all move along in order;
the lizard can be grasped with the

hand, yet it is found in royal palaces."

He also wrote (Proverbs 30:18-19):

"Three things are too high for me,
indeed four are, which I do not understand:
the way of the eagle in the sky,

the way of the serpent on the rock,
the way of the ship in the middle of the sea,
and the way of the man with the woman."

You can see in these wise words from King Solomon the four elements: the eagle is the king of the skies, the serpent creeps on the earth, the ship is moved in the water, and man and woman unite in the fire sign of love. Regarding the latter, Paul said, "This mystery is great; but I point it to Christ and the Church." (Ephesians 5:32) It is love that holds the world together, the Love from our God.

The evangelist Matthew (6:25-34) calls us not to worry, but to seek God and His kingdom first, and then everything else will be added to us. He refers to the birds of the air who do not sow and yet reap and asks us: "Are you not worth much more than they?"



This gives us pause for thought. There are comparisons to be read in the Bible, but there is also reference to the infinite creativity and wisdom of our Creator. He deserves the thanks, the praise and the honor.

At this point I would like to mention the jungle doctor of Lambarene, the German-French physician, philosopher, theologian, organist and musicologist Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965). The idea underlying every one of his utterances, sermons and philosophical thought is "Respect for Life". He criticized the thinking that is solely focused on the human being and saw life as a whole as worth living.

But now back to the profession of gardener. In these weeks I have been reading the book "The Secret Place" by William J. Dupley. In it he writes very touchingly and powerfully about the places where he meets with God to talk to Him as with a friend and to be accompanied and advised by Him.

On page 193 I could not believe my eyes and thought at first that I was not seeing or reading correctly! Which aspect of God did Dupley introduce to me here? You guess right: God as a gardener. Finally I read about what I had hidden a bit in my heart. Yes, and I could now lift a real *treasure* of memory and faith, bring it to light and make it fruitful!

Just, the light, which is so important for growth, the sunlight too. The goodness of the earth and the right measure of water. Good air to breathe. Knowledge of the interrelationships and the individual products; the gardener knows which individual plant needs what and when; he knows what is sown when and how and how it is cared for and what conditions it needs to thrive.

And then not to forget the patience, growth takes time, it is a progressive process until the fruits are there and can be harvested. But harvest time comes, just as our faith bears its fruit.

And only when the harvest is harvested, then comes the time of processing so that the fruits of summer are edible and give life. God is the gardener. And He wants to call us to it and equip us for it, that we copy His work and do it like Him.

Our commitment and work are also in demand. And we do well to ask God what task he has commissioned us to do and how we can fulfill it. He will show us, he gives us

the abilities and the strength to do it. He has created us uniquely and has given each of us things to do in life that only we can fulfill in this way. We don't have to be perfect to do that. Because God leads life even through our shortcomings to the good goal. He seeks friendship with us, which He shows us in the love of Christ.

This whole discovery is enormously comforting to us. Creation is not made and finished once and for all. Creation and creativity are ongoing.

Why should God show the locusts the orderly course and way – and not us believers? Why would he have given birds the abilities to fly their long distances and feed themselves – and not us?

There is tremendous intelligence and wisdom in His creation. There are infinite possibilities. We can dock with our spirit to His Holy Spirit in the communion of saints. He is our assistance that Jesus has given us. He is our Comforter and Exhorter who means well with us.

God's creation is a cycle. Perhaps we think too often in straight lines and should think more in circles. It is a coming and going, a withering and blossoming, a dying and becoming as we see on Good Friday and Easter with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote in his *West-östlicher Divan*, Book of the Singer:

“And as long as you do not have this,
this dying and becoming,
you are only a dull guest
on the dark earth.”

That's what I wanted to tell you today. Like gardeners, we can look deeply into God's handiwork. Even more: we can participate in it. We belong to it. And the more we talk to Him about it and ask Him in prayer what He wants to say to us and hear to Him to the end and act on His words afterwards, the more we are allowed to share in His fruits every day and enjoy a life that wells up into eternal Life. Amen!

Photos by Stana and Jakob Vetsch:
grasshopper "Gottesanbeterin"
and three birds on the roof of a house.
Taken in Timișoara, Romania.

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