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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Genesis 2: 8-15 (Selections); John 20: 15-16; Revelation 22: 1-3  
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Of Soil and Soul: Gardens and the Ethics of Care

*"They were careless people - they smashed up things and creatures  
 and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness,  
 and let other people clean up the mess they had made."*

-F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Many years ago, I visited Longwood Gardens just outside of Philadelphia, and I felt as though I had been brushed by an angel's wing. I had no special knowledge or interest in gardens or plants, and I hadn't even visited voluntarily - a tour bus had dropped me and forty others off in order to pass a few empty hours. I walked in expecting to be bored, but in the space of perhaps ten minutes, I moved from indifference to feeling awestruck. The riot of colors, the perfumed scent of the air, the serene silence of the place - it moved me toward something like speechless prayer, the deepest kind of prayer, I believe. I had been reading *Paradise Lost* at that time, and I was reminded of Milton's description of Eden:

Thus was this place,  
 A happy rural seat of various view;  
 Groves whose rich Trees wept odorous Gumms and Balme,  
 Others whose fruit burnisht with Golden Rinde  
 Hung amiable...and of delicious taste:  
 Betwixt them Lawns, or level Downs, and Flocks  
 Grasing the tender herb, were interpos'd,  
 Flours of all hue, and without Thorn the Rose:  
 The Birds thir quire apply; aires, vernal aires,  
 Breathing the smell of field and grove, attune  
 The trembling leaves (246-266).

That's a little what it felt like to me there at Longwood Gardens - like being ushered into Eden itself. It was an experience that awakened in me the power of gardens in the human imagination, and throughout cultures all around the world. There are, of course, some very famous gardens that some of us may have visited: we can think of Zen gardens in Japan, or of the sprawling gardens of Versailles, or the Kew Gardens of London. There is a garden we used to visit on Tree of Life trips located at the foot of the Mount of Beatitudes, and it is magical. But there are others closer to home: the garden over at Harkness State Park is enchanting at twilight, and though it's smaller by far, our own garden just outside the Fellowship Hall is lovely, especially now.

But then there are the mythic gardens found within our oldest stories: it is a garden that Odysseus must leave behind on Calypso's island at the beginning of *The Odyssey* in order to find his way home, and it is a garden that Gilgamesh visits on his quest for immortality in what we

believe is the world's oldest epic, from Mesopotamia, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is a garden that Dante discovers at the top of Mount Purgatory, at the very threshold of heaven, and it is a garden to which the young storytellers flee from the plague in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Of course, the Bible itself begins and ends in a garden, and it is not an accident that Jesus is resurrected in a garden.

The world is now in bloom, and more than a few of us have had our hands covered in soil of late, preparing flowerbeds and gardens in our own yards. What are we to say about this powerful impulse to nurture cultivated forms of beauty? What are these enchanted worlds that seem to bring us closer to the gods - or to God? What do they tell us about what it is to be human? Above all, what do they tell us about the life of faith, and about the form of communal belonging that we're celebrating today?

We have, over the past several weeks, touched on Hannah Arendt's notion of *Amor Mundi*, love of the world. We are a worldly sort of people here at FCCOL, in love with the world around us. But there are few better ways to figure this love for the world - *Amor Mundi* - than by reflecting on gardens, and the care that they entail.

Let's start by spending a little bit of time in Eden, with Eve. A curious feature of the Genesis story is that there seems to be no particular motivation for eating from the tree of good and evil. There is no particular motivation for what later comes to be called "the fall" of humanity. Later generations have supplied all sorts of motivations, but in the Genesis account, there's little to go on. With just a little prompting from the serpent, Eve eats, and then Adam follows. It is, so far as we can discern, a careless act.<sup>1</sup> For in the world of Paradise, there is little to care for. Everything is merely given.

It is only after eating of the fruit that something like care is introduced into human affairs. Immediately after that act, Adam and Eve are sentenced by God to toil upon the earth - becoming the world's first agriculturalists. So too, it is only after the eating of the fruit that Eve is sentenced to the labor pangs of childbirth - only after the fall does mothering exist. Indeed, it is only outside of Eden that a recognizably human world takes shape.

Strange to say it, but might Eve's choice have been a good thing? On this mothering Sunday, we might wonder if, contrary to the way she is usually portrayed, Eve actually sensed the limitations of Paradise, and chose a world of care rather than the eternal carelessness that an unfallen state would seem to imply. Rather than merely inhabiting a Garden, Eve chooses a life in which she will have to labor as a Gardener herself. Rather than living in a timeless realm, where cycles of life and death, and therefore of meaning and purpose, do not exist, Eve chooses a path of mothering. It is what Hannah Arendt called natality, birthing, which of course must also entail grieving and dying. Rather than remaining in a state of permanent childlike innocence, Eve chooses a life of responsibility, toil, and care. In that sense, she is the archetype neither of temptation nor of evil, but of what it is to be fully human.

Let me open a brief parenthesis. I'm well aware that such an idea runs counter to much that we have inherited about the story of Adam and Eve. Most readers of the Bible have taken the story at face value, and have used it to locate all those features of the world that we most deplore. Beginning in the second century with Irenaeus, and continuing through Paul Tillich's writings in the 20th century, there has always been a minority report among theologians who understand the eating of the fruit to be a necessary step toward human maturity. Using analogies

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<sup>1</sup> I am following the lead of Robert Pogue Harrison in this reading of Eve, and of gardens more generally. See his comments on the "Entitled Opinions" podcast, on "Gardenism." <https://entitled-opinions.com/2023/08/31/on-gardenism-with-william-rosenzweig/>

of parenting, such thinkers believe that we witness in Eve something akin to the differentiation that a child must experience in order to achieve independence from a parent. While often painful, such differentiation is the condition for a fully achieved personhood. It entails a form of growth for both the parent and the child, which can lead to mistakes from both parties - from God and humanity alike. But to stay forever in the womb, or in the protective shelter of Paradise, is to forgo the weight of history, together with the joys and cares of one's own humanity. End Parenthesis.

Now here is the greatest irony surrounding Eve. Though she and Adam were expelled from a Garden, is that very exile that makes of her the prototype for all of those following her who would tend and keep a garden. Though all the gardens of the world seem to gesture toward a primal garden, to enter Longwood Gardens, as I did many years ago, or a Japanese Zen garden, or even our garden here at FCCOL, is to enter a world of continual care. The ground must be cultivated. The seed beds must be refined. The plants must be pruned and clipped. They must be nourished and fed with sunlight and with water. The work and the upkeep are constant, as are the demands placed upon the gardener. In exchange, the garden provides joy and delight, but also shade and food and shelter for other living beings. It is a living system of reciprocity, where human care brings flourishing for many creatures, including humans. It is Eve who initiates this labor, who offers us this blessing.

Gardens have a literal dimension, but they fascinate because they extend into other realms as well.<sup>2</sup> It is not an accident that the ancient Greek schools of philosophy were all attached to gardens, so that the care of the soil was also bound up with the formation of personhood. It's a pattern that extends right up to the present day, for most college and university campuses resemble gardens. Both the soil and soul can receive seeds that will bloom only later. Teachers and mentors know this, as do those of us who have received the gifts of passionate and imaginative teaching. Like the soil, a soul is a malleable entity. Without proper care, it can become horribly damaged. But with the proper care, what is planted in a soul can grow not only into technical know-how, which is what much of our education has been reduced to, but into the sorts of virtues the ancient schools of wisdom sought to cultivate: lives given to friendship, generosity, care, patience, gratitude, and hope.

Which brings me to FCCOL, and to all of you. Many churches, though not all, make it a practice to cultivate gardens, and many churches, though not all, themselves resemble gardens. It so happens that this one does. That is not an accidental choice, for we too sense the connection between soil and soul. We too understand the importance of an ethic of cultivation and care, for the spaces we inhabit, but also for the people we are becoming. Jesus continually returned to agricultural metaphors in his parables, a nod to the relationship between the cultivation of the earth and the nourishing of human life. A sower scatters seeds. Seeds take root and grow. Trees bear good, and sometimes bad, fruit. A harvest is gathered. A vineyard is planted. Like gardens, they all require tending and care - as do people, as do communities. It is work that Jesus initiates, and that we are given to continue.

A good many of you have chosen to join the work of FCCOL a little more formally this morning, becoming members of this place. You have, in a very real way, taken up residence in a garden, a place that, we trust, will provide shelter and delight. But it is a place that requires cultivation. It is a place that requires constant nurture of the sort that gardeners, and perhaps also mothers, know best. And here I speak to all of us: we are each of us called to tend the garden

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

that is FCCOL that it may continually blossom into something beautiful. We are each called to turn the soil of this place, that our very souls might blossom into beauty. Some folks do that by joining one of our choirs. Some folks do that by volunteering in our Sunday School. Some folks do that by serving on one of our Boards or Committees. Some do it by throwing themselves into the White Elephant Sale, or by serving in our food pantry. Some do it by mentoring our confirmands or by forging relationships in New London, or with our mission partnerships. You may see a way to cultivate the garden that is FCCOL that we haven't yet imagined, and if you do, we'd love to hear about it. Here at FCCOL, we are children of Eve, which means that we are called to lives of cultivation and care.

That extends far beyond this place too. We've each been called to become gardeners, and that work extends into the social, political and economic spheres of our lives as well. Here, I return to *Amor Mundi*, the love of the world, although I have been describing it all along. You are called to be a gardener when you show up at work. You are called to be a gardener when you interact with other human beings. You are called to be a gardener in the purchases you make and in the life choices you enact. You are called to be children of Eve not only here, but everywhere.

One more thing. Though it may be obvious, it bears saying that this ethic of care is noticeably lacking in our public affairs today. With words that could have ripped from our own headlines, words worth quoting once again, Fitzgerald put it best in *The Great Gatsby* when describing those intoxicated by wealth, by luxury, by success, and by influence: "They were careless people - they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, and let other people clean up the mess they had made." The careless are smashing the world into pieces even as I speak. I suspect we'll be cleaning up the mess for a long time to come. But so it was in 1924, when Fitzgerald wrote those words. So has it been, I suspect, ever before and will be ever after.

Thankfully there are those who have sensed the vocation of Eve. There are those who have responded to the animate energy of the garden, and who continually show up to offer care, cultivating the soil of the earth, of institutions, and of human lives. There are those who plant and replant. There are those who tend what has been neglected. There are those who mend what the careless have used and discarded. There are those, such as you, who know what it means to be constant gardeners - on plots of earth, and in human souls. Amen.