

Remembering Doyle Sager - The Garden of Memories (Colossians 2:6-7 NRSV)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/remembering-doyle-sager-the-garden-of-memories

Colossians 2:6-7

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

In his book *The Jesus Creed*, Scot McKnight shares the moving story of Margaret Ault. When Margaret was just about to complete her Ph.D. at Duke, something unexpected—but quite welcomed—happened: she fell in love. She went on a date with a Korean American immigrant named Hyung Goo Kim, and the sparks flew. But almost as quickly as the sparks became a fire, they were under threat of being extinguished.

Hyung Goo informed Margaret he had a terminal illness. Margaret was devastated. In her own words in her book *Sing Me to Heaven*, she writes, “I’d just met someone I liked, and we were definitely not going to live happily ever after. I felt like I had been kicked in the gut by the biggest boot in the world.”

Still, she and Hyung Goo were married. In his book McKnight asks the question many of us would ask: “Why would anyone invite into the core of their being so much pain?” The answer unfolds in the rest of Margaret and Hyung Goo’s story.

When Margaret was in graduate school at Duke, she and Hyung Goo loved to walk in the Duke gardens, and so knowledgeable did they become of its plants that they somewhat “supervised construction” of a new project, walking through each part of the garden routinely. In their last spring together in 1995, the garden seemed especially beautiful [to them].

Hyung Goo died that fall and Margaret returned to the gardens in the spring where a memorial garden of roses was being constructed in his honor. In her book, Margaret reflects on visiting the garden that spring, writing this:

“Where peonies were promised, there were only the dead stumps of last year’s stalks; where day lilies were promised, there were unprepossessing tufts of foliage; where hostas were promised, there was nothing at all. And yet I know what lushness lay below the surface; those beds that were so brown and empty and, to the unknowing eye, so unpromising, would be full to bursting in a matter of months. Is the whole world like this? Is this what it might be like to live in expectation, real expectation, of the resurrection? Was not Hyung Goo’s and my life together like this? Empty and sere (*sir*), and yet a seedbed of fullness and life for both of us.”ⁱ

The journey of grief often leads us through gardens where peonies and day lilies and hostas were promised, yet there is nothing at all or, at most, lifeless remnants of what once was. 12 months ago, Doyle was diagnosed with lung cancer; six months ago, he went to be with Jesus. Those of us who deeply love Doyle and ache for his presence, and those among us who have lost someone they love, know these gardens all too well. We've walked these gardens.

And yet, as followers of Jesus, we know those garden beds so brown and empty and, to the unknowing eye, so unpromising, are the very places where hope and life spring forth – both now and eternally.

On January 24, the Sunday after Doyle's death, I shared this Dietrich Bonhoeffer quote. *"There is nothing that can replace the absence of someone dear to us, and one should not even attempt to do so. One must simply hold out and endure it. At first that sounds very hard, but at the same time it is also a great comfort. For to the extent the emptiness truly remains unfilled one remains connected to the other person through it. It is wrong to say that God fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely unfilled and thus helps us preserve — even in pain — the authentic relationship. Furthermore, the more beautiful and fuller the remembrances, the more difficult the separation. **But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy.** One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain."*

These past six months have confirmed Bonhoeffer was indeed familiar with the garden of grief, and from his time and experience there, Bonhoeffer learned grieving *with gratitude* gently and slowly transforms the garden of grief into one of life and joy.

When we cannot see the peonies, the day lilies, nor the hostas, it is in those holy and hard moments we help each other remember this garden is a seedbed of fullness and life because of Jesus. And the practice of gratitude is the Spirit's invitation to get our hands in the dirt and join God in the redeeming work.

Today's scripture is part of a letter Paul wrote to the Christian community in the town of Colossae. The believers were struggling with outside influences and subtly drifting in their understanding of the importance and centrality of Christ to their lives and faith. Out of great concern, Paul encourages them to remember. When life around you is painful or uncertain, when you feel lost, confused, or stuck in a never-ending garden of grief, remember. Remember who you are and whose you are and live faithfully out of that remembering. Remember, Paul writes in verse 7, that you are rooted in Christ and built up in him. Remember you are established in the faith. Remember what you have been taught. And when you remember, overflow with thankfulness.

Remembering with gratitude is what we do when we gather for worship. We remember each time we gather at Christ's table to share in the Lord's Supper. We remember when we pray aloud the family prayer that Jesus taught us. We remember when we welcome a new brother or sister in Christ into the baptismal waters. We remember each Advent as we welcome the

Christ child. We remember each Lent as we walk with Christ to the cross and declare Easter Morning that Jesus is alive and has forever turned graves into gardens.

We remember, in part, because Doyle faithfully taught us these things the past 24 years. And in our remembering, we give thanks. We give thanks for our pastor, and we give thanks to our God – who in kindness and sovereignty, brought Doyle and Janet to us.

As the Sager family shared in their letter today to us, keep telling the stories that need to be shared about Doyle, about things he cared about, and about the love he embodied, the God he served, the Jesus he taught us about, the Jesus we love. Each story shared is a day lily that finds its way up through the soil, wet with tears, to bring beauty and joy to our world. And, oh, how our world desperately needs more beauty and joy.

May we commit to keeping our hands in the dirt, kneeling side by side with grateful hearts, as we join God in God’s redeeming work in the gardens of our hearts and our world.

Any may we continue to be the faith family Doyle prayed for us to be as we live our lives in Christ, rooted, and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as we were taught, a people overflowing with thankfulness.

Amen

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I want to invite us to remember and give thanks for Doyle, and to share this bouquet of memories from our garden of gratitude with the Sager family so they, too, might be blessed by the goodness of Doyle that endures. For those of you in-person, you will find cards at the end of each row. During our next song, we will remain seated, and we invite you to take a card and write down a special memory or reflection about Doyle you would like to share with the family. If you don’t finish during the song, don’t worry - you still have time in the remainder of the service or after it concludes. After the service ends, there are two places for you to leave these gifts for the family. There is a bowl here at the front and there is a bowl in the lobby at the welcome desk.

For those of you joining us online or those present who prefer an online option, you can text “Doyle” to 313131 to complete an online form with your reflection. And, of course, you can mail or drop off a note to the church office at any time, and we’ll make sure the family receives your note.

God of hope and joy – today we raise our hymn of grateful praise for the gift of Doyle Sager. We thank you for your kindness in calling him to be our pastor, our shepherd, our friend. We thank you for his legacy of love and faithfulness. We pray these memories we share will fill our hearts with gratitude and fill the hearts of Doyle’s beloved family with joy. Amen.

ⁱ Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed* (Paraclete Press, 2005), pp. 286-288

ⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Works*, vol. 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), letter no. 89, page 238.