

“The Next Ten,”

11 September 2005

Message part 1

Little did we dream, when The Garden began on September 10th, 1995, that we would be standing here ten years later celebrating what we're celebrating. I know there are many of you who don't really know the whole story about how The Garden came to be, so I hope the rest of you will be patient with us while we tell how God came very alive for many of us through The Garden.

It began in the fall of 1994. At that time, I was working on the final project for my doctorate, which was around the role of women in leadership in the church. My goal was to create a video sharing the stories of women, who are leaders in our churches, a video which highlighted the positive contributions women could make to the ministry.

This was going on during a very trying time in my own life. My Dad had died late that summer, our daughter was off to college, and it was the second year of a new senior pastor at St. Luke's. Like many of my colleagues, I was asking God what was in store for me in the future. Where was I to be in ministry? Actually, the question was even more basic than that...It was asking God IF ordained ministry was still to be the path for me, or if God was opening some other door that that I needed to pay attention to.

Both of these situations converged on a plane trip to Denver where I was to conduct a series of video interviews with a number of men and women on leadership. On the plane, I was reading a book by Tom Peters entitled, *The Tom Peters Seminar: Crazy Times Call for Crazy Organizations*. I had just finished reading a story about a Japanese gentleman who went to his boss and asked, "What do you want me to do? What do you want me to make?" His boss simply replied "Make something great," and the man invented Nintendo. After I read that part, I fell asleep and had a dream. I know that Suzanne is convinced it was a drop in cabin pressure, but I know it was a God-dream.

When I awakened, I told my friend, "I've had a revelation from God." He said, "You must be sick. This isn't the Linda McCoy I know." But I knew. All the fear and uncertainty and turmoil that had raged inside me for months was gone, and I was filled with a deep sense of peace that has never left me. I didn't have all the words I needed to express what I experienced, but I knew deep in my heart that I was supposed to be doing something far different from anything I'd ever done before. There was no clarity about where, when or how, but the general direction was very clear.

Song: "Dream Big"

Video special part 1

Message Part 2

Fortunately, some listened as the story was shared, and others began to express interest in being a part of this—whatever this was. Together we went about shaping a worship experience that was something that reflected our beliefs, and what we believed to be the essentials of the faith. But, how could we sort out that which was essential and of God from those things that were trappings, and not necessarily essential trappings. I can tell you that those of us who gathered to form what was to become The Garden spent a lot of time in prayer and conversation with God and with one another, conversation about the important things to share.

Those of us who struggled with the essence of our faith in those early months and years were finally able to capture that which we believe to be essential to The Garden in our core values and in our mission and

vision statements. If you look at your program, you'll see our core values listed. They are: **spirituality, love, purposefulness, inclusiveness, creative excellence, celebration and empowerment.** Our vision is this: **The Garden is a celebration of life, a journey into faith, and the soulful embrace of all.** The mission of The Garden is **to engage all in the quest to know and share the unconditional love of God.** Let's think about them together for a moment.

Frankly, as I reflect on them once again, it occurs to me how inadequate words are to express what we really mean. One of the things I'm realizing is that, along with identifying what The Garden is about at its core, these values and mission and vision really have personal application for each one of us. We might use different words or images, but it seems to me that these are the values Jesus lived and taught, and that these are the values that make our lives worthwhile and meaningful.

It's really hard to know where to begin with this, but let's begin with the most important thing—the unconditional love of God. I suspect that some of you have gotten very tired of hearing it over the years, because we've said it so much. However, we're going to say it again—God loves each and every one of us, unconditionally, no strings attached, and that, in a nutshell, is the way we're to love one another.

To summarize what Jesus called the greatest commandments, number 1 & 2—we're to love God with all our heart (and the only way we can even begin to do that is to know in our hearts that God loves us totally and completely), and then we're to love our one another as we love ourselves. When our core values list "love" as one of them, that's what we're talking about.

And when we list the word "spirituality," we're referring to the process, the journey, the unfolding of our relationship of love with God and with one another. Jesus always offered love, acceptance and forgiveness; we should do no less. The essence of the faith, to me, is that it's not about right rules—following this religious regulation or that one. It's about right relationship—with God and with one another. That needs to be our focus and concern. That's really why we use the word "spirituality," because it really catches the sense of what we're about, and because it has to do with each of us independently and together experiencing that awakening of our spirits through God's love.

All the rules in the book are shallow and meaningless if we don't know and share God's unconditional love. That means that God's unconditional love is the starting and ending point of the rest of our core values. We want that understanding to underlie everything we do or say, how we live, the choices we make...everything.

Special Video part 2—underscored from B&B

Message Part 3

The very first service at The Garden on September 10th, 1995, was entitled "Come As You Are," and that's we wanted The Garden to be for everyone. Everyone is accepted and welcomed here—men women, young, old, married, single, gay, straight, no matter what color, or faith or nationality, or background, or job, or wealth...everyone is welcome.

When I visited Glide Church in San Francisco a few months ago, I was very taken with what was said when we were welcomed there. It was, "**If God made you, we love you.**" We don't say that every week here, but maybe we should. It's a reminder that God made every one of us, that no one is better or worse than anyone else. We're all equal members of God's family; we're insiders, not outsiders, and we don't have to jump those any hoops to be accepted by God. God's unconditional love, instead of laying down rules and forcing us to be good people, fills us with a love for one another, a love so strong that we *want* to change; we want to live our lives differently.

That love under girds all our core values, and especially “inclusiveness.” That means that we are inclusive in every way, shape and form. For starters, we are careful about the language we use, wanting to make sure that we are true to include everyone, and not just some. We want to use words that include all of humanity, rather than including some, and excluding others. It includes honoring other faith paths, and not condemning those whose path in life has been different from ours. And, of course, that term also includes our language about God, never wanting to limit God our understanding of God, but certainly always falling short of naming the expansive nature of who God is and what God is like.

Song: Just the Way You Are

Message Part 4

Let’s talk about the other values that are the heart of soul of The Garden. One of them is “purposefulness.” Simply put, that refers to the fact that our lives have meaning and purpose; it’s our quest in the course of living our lives to discover what that is, and to live it out. It’s our search for meaning; it’s the search to know ourselves; it’s the search to know God. All that is part of this life-long journey to know our purpose in living.

Going right along with finding a sense of purpose is empowerment. It’s our goal to plant seeds of God’s love and to water them in such a way that they begin to grow and blossom. That has to do with sharing ministry together. You see, those of us who are called pastors are not the only ones here to minister to others. We’re all here to care for our brothers and sisters. Therefore, we all need to discover what it is that we have to share and to being to share those gifts with others.

Celebration is named as another of our core values. In fact, the vision or identity, in part, is that we’re here to celebrate life together. It’s to know that life is good; it’s a gift from God, and we’re here to rejoice in it, and live it fully and completely.

And then there’s the last of our core values—creative excellence. It is our goal to strive toward excellence, and never be content with mediocre. “Good enough” is not good enough. We’re not trying to be perfect, because that’s not within our human realm, but we are trying to be creative and innovative and do the best we can as we attempt day after day and week after week to share God’s love with everyone we encounter.

Song: “God’s Been Good to Me”

Message Part 5

That’s a quick walk through the heart and soul of The Garden. Now, I know you may be thinking…”This is all about the past and present, but this Sunday is entitled “The Next Ten. Where does that come in?” Right now, my friends. The next ten years of The Garden’s life begins today. What will they hold?

Without becoming so specific that we can’t hear other ideas and possibilities, let me say simply what I believe. That is, in essence, that our core values, or what we might call our DNA, will stay as it is. They are at the core of our being. However, the ways those values get lived out will inevitably change. Nothing stays the same, nor should it. Times change; people change; life changes, but that which guides our lives and our being together as The Garden is constant.

Our experience and understanding of God is what changes and evolves and grows as we experience more and more of this wonderful life that’s before us. I guess what I’m saying is that our DNA is who we are, but the way we live that out will undoubtedly change in form, but not in substance.

A Garden team member sent me an email not long ago, talking about the next ten years. And I think he said it the best way I’ve heard anyone say it. As we look toward the future in The Garden, we need to ask

ourselves and one another: “How can we ‘do’ church differently—differently?” That revelation from God to do something far different from anything I had ever done before is still there. We can never be content with where we are, thinking that we’ve arrived. Each day is a revelation, and I for one, can’t wait to see what “doing” church differently—differently really looks like.

One thing is for sure—we aren’t going it alone. If we are willing to listen and trust God, I know that God is leading us and will continue to lead us. That’s why I really like the words of our Bible passage for today. The prophet Jeremiah was sharing God’s presence and promise to the people of Israel who were in exile in a foreign land. According to Jeremiah, God said, “I have... plans to give you the future you hope for. When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I’ll listen. When you come looking for me, you’ll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.”

I believe with all my heart, that when we call on God, when we pray to God, when we look for God, when we’re serious about finding God’s direction for us as The Garden, we won’t be disappointed. God has led us the last ten years, and I know that God will lead us into a new future, into the next ten years.

Special Video 4: quilt, future, etc.

Close part 1

As we leave here this morning, I want to thank you , on behalf of all of us who are involved with The Garden, for the immense joy, honor and privilege it is to be with you on this journey.

Song “Thank you for Being a Friend”

Close part 2

As we step into the future, we will do it hand in hand with one another, and knowing that God’s love surrounds and fills and leads us into a new day.

See you at the birthday party! Have a GREAT Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.