

Death comes to the hydrangea

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When I married at age 41, one of the gifts I received was a hydrangea, the kind that grows someday into a beautiful umbrella of pink blossoms. I delighted in it. Despite our young dog's scrabbling at its roots, and rude winters freezing it in a bent-over position, it blossomed abundantly. We staked it and pruned it and relied on it, until after a not-so-bad winter, the wedding present hydrangea, aged seven-and-a-half, simply did not put forth leaves or buds. I stood beside it downhearted, wondering what I could have done differently. How could I have saved it?

In the fall, when it became clear that my marriage would not outlast the hydrangea, friends came from all over the country to stand beside me, and—in the way that people have when they want to help us, but the real problem can't be solved—they fell to doing tasks around my house. They painted and raked and mowed the lawn and tried to fix the icemaker and filled the freezer with lasagna portioned into little containers. In the midst of a flurry of yard work, a dear one offered to clear out the dead tree. I agreed, turned away to consider a lilac that needed pruning, and a moment later turned back to see it was already out of the ground, like an oversized twig in her hand.

Whatever happened to my hydrangea had happened at the root.

Truly I tell you, it is not wise to spend our time assigning roles in the parable of the hydrangea. It is enough to say its death reinforced my sense that something was over.

I find it to be the same with Jesus and his metaphors. What if we just let the images wash over us instead of being in a hurry to assign parts to ourselves and to others as if they were absolutely unchangeable? Suppose we meditate for a moment on the idea that the good news of God's love is forever being sown in the world...scattered widely without regard for likely climates or soils, strewn wildly even in the places it is least likely to be received.

A sower went out to sow, and on any given day that least-likely place might be any of our hearts.

But now and then, thankfully, we are the soil where God's seed takes root. Now and then, thankfully, we are the seed that makes contact and grows where someone is hungry for God's grace. Even occasionally, we are the ones to put a hand into the bag slung over our shoulders, the ones who fling the seed of life and love into places where it assuredly takes root.

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