

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus places heavy emphasis on God's realm, what it looks like, how we enter it, and how we tend to prevent ourselves and others from reaching it. In Matthew, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven, or God's realm, to many different situations and stories. I would liken the kingdom of heaven to a couple that wanted to replace a fence.

When Adam and I moved into our house in Decatur, one of the top priorities was fixing or replacing our terribly dilapidated fence. As we ventured into the messy brambles on each side of our fence, part of which backed up to the woods, we discovered overwhelming networks of wisteria vines that had eroded the land so badly that we could see all of them, and even walk over them, in some areas. The wisteria had even pulled down our fence in some places. And, as any cascade of discoveries in a home improvement project would go, we ultimately concluded that to replace the fence, we had to get rid of the wisteria first.

This led to us trying to figure out how to get rid of the wisteria without further damaging the whole ecology of the area. We found a small business that did natural removal and targeted poisoning of invasive species. They did a ton of work that we never could have done ourselves, clipping wisteria vines around the perimeter of our property, tilling soil and bringing in local earth materials to rebuild our long-gone topsoil, building rain gardens to capture water and hold in the regenerating earth, and teaching us how to target-poison the vines.

They also taught us a whole lot about

what it meant to be a good steward of the earth. We already did what most people do to be good stewards of creation, and perhaps a little extra, but we had no idea the damage done by invasive species and how few native plants remained. We had no idea what a disastrous impact non-native plants had on the environment as a whole. We had no idea how many insects crucial for soil health and erosion mitigation relied on us leaving leaves where they dropped rather than blowing or raking them. We had no idea that wisteria wasn't just ugly and choked healthy trees to death, but that it also took over so much land space so quickly and caused so much erosion that no grasses – native or not – could thrive with it in the area. We had no idea that in order to stop our backyard essentially from sliding into the creek bed behind it, creating holes in which people could get their feet mangled and broken (yes, that happened to Adam) - We had no idea to stop the erosion we had to eradicate as many invasives as possible and replace them with native grasses and plants. We learned that our favorite lawn grasses grow right on the surface of the soil and thus don't hold anything together. That's why bermudagrass and fescue eventually stop growing unexpectedly – because they crowd out the native grasses that hold the soil together and allow nutrients to stay where they need to be. We learned that native grass roots grow several feet down into the ground, so when they are allowed to propagate, they create a barrier to keep nutrients in and erosion from happening.

During this process, we also learned about controlled burning – something we can't do on our property inside the Atlanta

Perimeter. In a controlled burn, the fire does many things at the same time: It *both* removes invasives *and* scatters the seeds of native grasses. It *both* burns away the ticks we obviously don't want *and* enriches the soil in which ecologically crucial insects make their home and get their food. It *both* destroys *and* regenerates *at the same time*. These pairs of "both/ands" do not make logical sense on their own. Invasive removal, rewilding, and controlled burning are illogical, counter-cultural concepts for most of us. That's why it's so hard for ecologists to explain to people how this process happens and get them to buy into it. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will God not much more clothe us, of little faith?

Non-native wildflowers only provide nectar; they do not provide the shelter and nutrients needed for the rest of the insect life cycle. Eventually, when the native grasses propagate and the buttonbush flowers and the beautyberry gets to full height and the wildflowers take to the newly regenerated soil, the bugs and butterflies that depend on these specific, native plants will have what they need to live out their entire life cycle from birth to egg-laying. The smaller birds will have the shelter they need from the raptors in the tall grasses and the food they need for the winter on the shrubs. When the cycles that are supposed to happen are free to happen naturally and without hindrance, the wildlife doesn't have to work as hard to get what they need. And as a bonus, the fields are clothed with beauty. Lasting beauty. The kind that doesn't require a lawn guy or weed spray or tick removal. The kind

that comes from God's own provision. Consider the native plants of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

And all this happened because we wanted to replace a fence. We wanted to heap up the empty shell of a fence just because it was the thing that was broken. The appearance was embarrassing. Yes, the fence was old, and yes, it was poorly installed, and yes, some way-too-small posts were used for a very large car gate. But the panels were indeed being pulled down by these wisteria vines. Erosion made the concrete useless and toppled the fence posts. What we thought was just an appearance problem – a fence problem – was actually an environmental disaster in our own backyard.

The good plants could eventually take over the land again, restoring it to how God had created it. But we learned that while we were removing the invasives that it was our job to remove, such as speedwell and stilt grass and all these other things we had never heard of before – we had to simultaneously start planting these native grasses and shrubs and ferns so the invasives eventually would have nowhere to grow. We *both* had to *learn* about what was meant to be there *and* do the work. We had to *both* uproot *and* plant. We had to restore the earth so the lilies of the field and the birds of the air had no hindrances – no stumbling blocks, as Jesus would say – to receiving their provision from God. And added unto us would be a fence that would not be pulled down by erosion and wisteria vines. A

backyard in which no one would stumble and break their foot on our little piece of God's holy land (pun intended) in metro Atlanta.

We learned that slapping up any old fence and pretending like everything is just great would just lead to more cost and more labor and another rotting fence in the not-so-distant future. If we had striven only for the fence to be replaced, the beauty and refuge and restoration of creation that is now happening in our backyard would not have been added unto us. We had to strive first for the wellness of God's creation – definitely part of God's kingdom – and unto us was added the privacy and security of a fence, the ability to build a patio, the beauty of restored land, and the visitation of beautiful owls, hawks, lizards, butterflies, orioles, and tanagers.

Yes, it cost money. And yes, it took a lot of work – it still does; we're still fighting that wisteria. It would be easy for us to complain and put on the appearance of fasting and suffering for the kingdom, as it were. And don't get me wrong, there has been a lot of complaining and bickering in this process. We have had to learn to see our time and money and labor as a tithe back to the earth. A gift to God's creation that will benefit all the land and forest around us. An active prayer that God's kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And the irony is not lost on me of talking about this prayer in public. We have quietly prayed this prayer in and for and through our yard for three years now. So maybe now is the time to pray it more

publicly.

This kind of prayer is not one of empty phrases. The Lord's prayer strives endlessly for God's will to be done and for God's realm to take over all the earth. This kind of prayer looks beyond the need for a new fence and looks for why the old one collapsed. This kind of prayer sees how everything in creation is connected and how one wisteria vine divides and invades and chokes out native grasses and plants. This kind of prayer uproots the invasives continually while doing some selective cut-and-paint, once-and-for-all poisoning of the main vines. And this kind of prayer lets God's creation do what God created it to do, exist how God created it to exist, so that the lilies of the field and birds of the air do not have to toil or spin or reap and store in barns. This kind of prayer asks for the debt of money and time we have paid in this process to be replaced with the additions of security of fence and fellowship on our patio, the additions of birds and wildlife and wildflowers. This kind of prayer asks for us to grow our own ability to forgive the debts of those who planted the wisteria and nandina and English ivy. This kind of prayer uproots and poisons invasive, destructive worry, replacing it with fruitful concern and compassion.

We cannot deprive the lilies of the field of water and topsoil and nutrients and still expect them to be clothed in splendor. The food God provides the birds of the air doesn't get placed directly in their beaks. And so we can't expect that they do no work at all. The birds of the air have to be able to access the food that God provides and

intends for them, one way or another. So we can't expect invasive plants that poison them to allow them to be nourished. We have to plant the things that will keep them well and alive, and we have to ensure they have access to those things without the stumbling blocks of poisonous nandina berries.

Sometimes when we plant things we think look nice in the garden, we don't realize the damage they do. We see the appearance. We seek the curb appeal, the surface-level beauty. But if we plant things where God did not design them to take root, we risk an underground network of invasive vines, that, in time, will erode the good soil and create stumbling holes and poison the birds and choke the tall trees and collapse the fallible security of the fence.

So when we pray that God's kingdom come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we pray a prayer that digs beneath the surface. We pray a prayer that seeks not after appearance but after righteousness. In seeking the righteousness of fertile topsoil and the flourishing of all living things in God's creation, we find in time that the desires of our heart, which God already knows, will come to us. It may not look like the same fence or patio of our original dreams, but if we seek first the realm of God and its righteousness, what will be added unto us will be more beautiful and sustainable and longer-lasting than anything we would have built on eroded ground above a network of invasive vines. The desires of our heart will start to fit into God's vision for the world, making it easier for the kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven in a longer-lasting, maybe

even permanent, way.

A controlled burn, like some of the less "inflammatory" work Adam and I continue to do in our backyard, is *both* a choice, an action taken by human beings to protect the land, *and* it is a letting go of control of how nature operates. It protects the good that is *already* there and has *not yet* had the chance to take over. Nature as God created it can and will once again do what it was created to do on its own without our intervention, but we have to initiate the process. Destroying and uprooting the plants that poison the soil and choke out the good stuff is frustrating and takes years and looks absolutely ridiculous to those who don't understand what we're doing or why we're doing it – Admittedly, we might have been those people in the past. But if that work is not neglected and if the beneficial stuff is being added back in and allowed to thrive at the same time as the uprooting and targeted poisoning and controlled burning is happening, eventually everything will come to a healthy completeness in which the natural process that God designed has no hindrances to its good work.

What seems illogical and takes too long and takes too much work and destroys things we once thought were totally fine like bermudagrass and monkey grass and English ivy – that is the stuff of the bizarre and illogical and messy and long-burning Gospel. And that is exactly the kind of work it will take to put flesh on the prayer we pray that God's kingdom come and will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven. Amen.