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Tiller of Souls

Lord, You are our master gardener,
preparing the soil of our souls to receive
Your word. Carefully, tenderly, You
provide the water of life and the nutrients
needed for spiritual growth. Stones, thorny
thistles and weeds with stubborn tap roots
You gently cut out and remove. With merciful
care, You till and stir to prevent impacted ideas
from spoiling Your garden. Tilling takes time,
Lord; this preparation may be prolonged
over years or even decades.
Some soil is rockier than others.
Some soil is harder than others.
Some soil is but a superficial layer
that needs the rich, fertile compost
of Your grace to prevent it from blowing
away in an unforgiving wind from the north.
But You are a patient gardener who leaves
no soil untended, even in dark, wintry months
when other gardeners have hung up their tools.
Please, Lord, never stop tilling the soil
of our souls, we pray. Wield Your spade;
fertilize and water at will, until we are
ready to receive the sacred seeds of Your word.
Then, plant them deeply inside us so they will
germinate, grow strong and flourish, to yield
a harvest of riches for Your kingdom of such
abundance that we are astonished and
humbled at Your power working within us,
O master gardener of souls.

Prayer for Acceptance of Change

Lord, we know well that all life is in flux. Will not this green springy lawn we tread on today soon wither and turn to sparse, anemic blades? Will not the bright sunflowers whose petal-haloed heads seek the sky soon droop like stricken sentinels on shriveled stalks? We know these lessons, and yet we resist. What of the faces we see no more, those once we saw almost weekly in the same church pew? We miss them; we would wish them back. We know this is impossible, and yet we resist. How we linger over what is gone; how we long for the comfortable and familiar, settling into them as we would into an old stuffed chair that remembers our contours. How we resist the new and unknown, fearing them as we would the turn of a corner on a zigzag street in a foreign city scented with wood smoke and cinnamon. Lord, You were ever on the move; you knew how not to linger. Help us learn how not to cling to what cannot be regained or restored in this life. Help us be open to new faces, new voices and the new people sitting in that particular pew where once sat those we see no more. For all of it, every blade of grass, every petal from every sunflower, every face we ever loved, is joined in You. Why ever should we fear change when our one true constant is You?

New Green

Delicate as a fledgling's feathers are
the new green leaves of this new spring.
Only partially unfurled, these new
leaves of green dot the sky with all
the controlled abandon of a pointillist's
brush. Tiny star-like maple leaves share
this newly washed pale blue space with
little green tulip-poplar umbrellas.
Sprouting on long stems that were but
dry, brittle sticks in January (looking like
nothing so much as the legs of wading birds),
the hydrangeas' new green leaflets are
preparing for showy puff-blooms of
azure and deepest pink. Thorny rose stalks
welcome diminutive green harbingers of
their petaled crimson prizes yet to come.
All, all this new green responds to a
stronger sun and a breeze that has traded
its chill for a caress. Let us pause awhile
on this wooden bench and savor the new
green of this new season. Its invitation is
meant to be irresistible; its arrival is heralded
by harmonious trills and whistles and
the clicks of little claws on tree bark.
For we are not the only ones welcoming
this new green: all of the natural world
is waking up, stretching, unfurling, warbling,
clucking, scampering, swimming, slithering,
buzzing, flying, mating, nesting and once more
celebrating the renewed miracle of being alive.
Thank You, Lord, for once again giving us
the gift of Your new green.

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Summertime Respite

This sometime summertime cottage becomes something else when it hosts our stolen Mondays: compliant, complicit and slightly surreptitious, as if we are wayward children playing hooky instead of an employed married couple taking time off. Vagabond duffel-bag vacationers, we furtively luxuriate in Monday time, appropriated just for us. Lord, we have no wish to escape; we only desire the rest You promised us when we rest in You. Sometimes we hear the cottage's pine floors creak, protesting the weight of our shoes and possibly imminent departure. Staying over shushes them and us (shhhhhhhhhhh). The sway-backed twin beds under the slanted wall beckon, white coverlets turned back, white sheets cooled by a wafted window breeze. Let us sleep now. Monday mornings, the cottage sighs, gathering us back into its comfortable self, sheltering our bare Monday feet (no commute) and our lightened Monday souls (no job today). We breathe in air of salt and pine, breathe out a prayer of gratitude for this Monday gift. Shoeless, we pad into a whitewashed kitchen, where the yellow teapot will soon enough whistle its Monday welcome. We'll breakfast on the deck, where two beach chairs recline invitingly, proffering dewy favors for not being jackknifed the night before. Listen to the surf; when do you think the tide will be high? Soon enough, we'll walk to the beach, or... maybe we won't. Maybe we'll linger here. Lord, this stolen time is Your summertime gift, a paused time of respite, repose and reprieve. Soon enough, too soon, this rented summertime cottage will be boarded up for the season. But not just yet.. Please, Lord, we long for more of Your stolen Mondays.

Precious Summer Snapshots

How can we distill the summers we have
lived and loved into one exquisite memory?
Is there an elixir of summer? Lord, You know
how we yearn to savor this restful season
long past its inevitable end. It was You
who said to Your apostles, "Come away
by Yourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile."

And so, You have given us a gift: the muse
of memory, the living summer snapshots we store
in our minds that capture moments in time...

Feeling cool, moist sand on our bare soles as
we stroll by water's edge;

Watching from under a beach umbrella as
rolling breakers crash in snowy froth;

Seeing sandpipers scampering on spindly legs
so fast no incoming wavelet can catch them;

Applying sunscreen to the pale, narrow shoulders
of a child, the fresh scent strong in our nostrils;

Relishing the light residue of salt on our bare arms
after body-surfing the largest waves;

Lifting our eyes to a sky so clear we fall in love
with its shade of blue all over again;

Hearing the calming chant of the sea, muted
but present even as we walk inland, as if we are
holding invisible conch shells to our ears;

Hanging our wet bathing suits and soggy towels
over the porch railing for tomorrow;

Eating on paper plates at a hose-friendly picnic table
while watermelon juice runs down our chins.

Lord, when we must be far from the shore and the
only chant we hear is the cacophonous city noise of honking
horns and too-loud cell phone conversations, and we
turn our collars up to protect our ears from a snow-laden
wind...won't you please remind us that we can summon
at will the distillation of our summer joys? With Your
blessing we will add more memory snapshots next summer.

Thanksgiving Blessings

Temporal and fleeting are our lives
in this world; we know it well, Lord.
We know we are on a journey to You,
where we will find our only real home.
And yet..You have given us comforts
precious and plentiful for this journey.

We thank You for these earthly blessings.
You have placed us in homes with families;
we thank You for their much-loved faces
and voices. We thank You for the times
we sit together around our dining room
table holding warm, familiar hands while
saying grace. We thank You for lovingly
cooked turkey and mashed potatoes and
green beans spooned out generously
on grandmother's plates. We thank You
for cranberry sauce, tangy on the tongue,
and puffy biscuits fragrant from the oven.

We thank you for these earthly blessings.
We thank You for our church, where
we belong to a larger family, a family
linked by love of You. Surely these
bonds are strong, as are the blood ties
that bind us to our own kin. We thank
You for the skillful hands that arrange
glorious autumnal altar flowers just so;
we thank You for our pastors, Your appointed
servants, who so selflessly and generously offer us
the sacred spiritual food that sustains our souls.

We thank you for these earthly blessings,
gifts precious and plentiful for the journey.

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To Hold This Leaf

Not quite the unsullied gold
I had at first thought to hold
is this leaf I stooped to pluck
from an indifferent stair.
No, it is not unblemished treasure.
And yet...
Look at the brown speckles there,
akin to an alligator's skin:
perhaps they tell of drought.
And yet...
Observe the tears in this serrated side;
my leaf may have been buffeted for too long
by northerly winds overly strong.
And yet...
Finger the pinprick hole at the very top,
the tiny black spot by the spine;
an insect must have tarried awhile to dine.
No, this leaf is not untarnished gold.
And yet...
On what branch of what autumnal tree
was this leaf I now hold hung?
Did it leave willingly, its stem lightly awhirl?
Or was it hastily dislodged and flung? No matter.
Your backbone has served you well, veined leaf;
you have not begun to shrink and curl.
And yet...
When you do, I will cherish you all the more,
just as our Maker cherishes each of us in all
our seasons: from our earliest tender springtime
to summer ripeness to autumn crispness
to the bare-branched beauty of the
late winter of our lives.

Days of Autumn Gold

This is the soft season, protracted,
the time of half-denuded pin oak branches
reaching toward a washed blue sky
with feathered yellow leaves clingy and quivering,
as if they know they soon must fall.
But now sky caresses leaves; leaves caress sky.
These golden leaves can cling yet awhile.

Thank You, Lord, for days of autumn gold.

Early autumn sun is strong still on bare skin
in a sheltered spot where we rest on heated earth,
shedding jackets and rolling up khakis. Grass blades
warm the spaces between our toes; for we have flung
off socks and shoes. What magic there is in watching
antic sunbeams playing hopscotch on golden
leaves we are now discovering. Early autumn sun
is strong still on our faces, bare arms and toes.

Thank You, Lord, for days of autumn gold.

Sheep-like, a herd of small white puffs
drifts across the sky, a harbinger of sharper weather
yet to come. But we know this is no snow sky;
these sprightly little puffs are no kin to swollen
December clouds laden with sleety cargo that chills
with a thousand tiny stings. Early autumn sun
is strong still on earth that has yet to feel first
frost.

Thank You, Lord, for days of autumn gold.

There will be time for pumpkin carving and
cider sipping and gathering windfall apples. No need
yet to think of where we stowed the snow shovel
and where we shoved the boots and what we did
with stocking caps, scarves and woolen mittens. Like
frolicking children, we long to make this season last.

Thank You, Lord, for days of autumn gold.

Drawing Nearer to the Sacred

Sometimes we feel it, Lord, that strong sense that we are drawing near to a sacred space.

It can happen when we kneel in church and see a single shaft of light glance through stained glass.

It can happen when a choir soloist reaches an ethereal, other-worldly note.

It can happen outdoors, when we glimpse lofty pine boughs swaying in the wind or a butterfly alighting – just for an instant – on the upturned face of a flower.

It can happen when we tiptoe in to watch a sleeping child curled in bed, peaceful and still.

Transported are we at such times, sent briefly somewhere beyond this finite earthly realm.

Fleeting are they, these sacred moments.

They renew, they inspire, they humble, they heal.

They ask for no interpretation, no explanation.

Gifts from You are they, Lord, subtle signs of Your nearness. We pause, longing to prolong these moments out of time, but it is not to be.

Sucking us back into its own reality, the world reclaims us, and we are once more under harsh lights and subjected to constant din. We are clutched at, pawed and pummeled by too many competing demands.

And yet...hints of the divine remain with us, faint imprints of those otherworldly sacred spaces.

Wondrous secrets are they, to be guarded inwardly, much too precious to reveal.

Lord, during this wintry season we earnestly pray that You will send us more of these sacred moments. We so long to draw close to Your newborn son, Jesus, to feel Your nearer presence in holy spaces. Please help us to cultivate heightened sensibilities and a serenity of spirit so that we will never, ever miss a one of them.