

Cleaning the House Within

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

2 September 2018

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

After four and a half years of living in the rectory, I finally decided to do something about the weeds.

I was inspired in part by Fred Romanos and Martin McCann. They came over to cut back bushes and try to tame some of the wilderness. But with the rain we had this summer, more weeds moved in and vines were taking over the house, so I realized it was time.

For years, I had justified ignoring the landscaping by blaming previous rectors. In my mind, they had all planted too many plants. They had left me with too much to maintain so I wasn't going to try. And besides, the house is not visible from the street. Taylor and I were the only ones who saw the unkempt landscaping, and it wasn't bothering us. But this year, it started to bother me. So I'm trying to cut back the vines and pull the weeds a little bit at a time and try to figure out what is supposed to be there to see if we can get to some semblance of order.

My patient neighbors Bob and Mary Jane keep a very neat yard. It would be lovely if their neatness would spread naturally and take over our side of the fence. But that's not how it works. Wildness is what spreads.

Our lessons for today speak of a wildness of the heart that can easily grow unchecked. Allow me to name the weeds. From James: anger, sordidness, rank growth of wickedness, unbridled tongues. From the gospel: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. Quite a list. These and many more grow in us and among us like crab grass or Virginia creeper or mimosa weed.

The Pharisees were attempting to address the weediness of the heart in their own way. Their practices around hand washing may sound silly to us but to them it was serious business. Before giving the law through Moses, God told the people that they were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The Pharisees read that to mean that the laws written for priests should apply to everyone. That would make them all a kingdom of priests. Priests were required to wash their hands a certain way before entering the holy place and offering the sacrifice. So the Pharisees said everyone should wash that way before eating. It wasn't such a bad idea. They were trying to make meals sacred and bring all of life under God's law. And they believed that if they did this, their purity and holiness would spread to others and clean up the whole nation. Sort of like me wishing Bob and Mary Jane's neat yard would automatically take over mine.

And because they wanted holiness to spread this way, they often avoided unholy people. They weren't trying to be mean necessarily. They were being practical. If the people who were trying to be holy got contaminated, they would not be able to spread their holiness to others, and then where would they all be.

While Jesus may have understood their logic, he had a different understanding of holiness. He said holiness starts from within and goes out to others. Therefore, you can't be defiled or contaminated by someone or something from the outside. "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." It was similar to the idea of taking the log out of your own eye before pointing out the dust speck in your neighbor's. Look after your own heart.

Dag Hammarskjold served as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961. Kofi Annan who died recently was the seventh. Hammarskjold sought to unite the world in the midst of conflict in Korea and the Middle East. He knew the stakes were high. He had lived through World War II and the Holocaust. In his journal, which was published after he died in a plane crash, he famously reflected, "You cannot play with the animal in you without becoming wholly animal, play with falsehood without forfeiting your right to truth, play with cruelty without losing your sensitivity of mind. He who wants to keep his garden tidy does not reserve a plot for weeds." Look after your own heart.

Some weeds that grow in of our hearts are dangerous and have no helpful use. They are like poison ivy or poison oak. You'd never plant those intentionally and as soon as they spring up it is wise to get rid of them. Like wickedness, perhaps.

But some weeds in our gardens may be useful in certain settings. Consider kudzu. You may know the Kudzu Club of America distributed kudzu seeds and encouraged people all over the south to plant it for erosion control. In its native environment, kudzu is a lovely vine that grows modestly. In the Amazon in Brazil, it actually helps replenish the soil. Kudzu is useful in some places. But here within just a few years after it was introduced, people realized it was growing out of control.

Likewise, some of the biblical warnings are about things that are useful if kept in check. Anger, mentioned in James, is a helpful emotion. It lets us know something is wrong. It points out a pain that needs to be addressed. We don't need to apologize for anger or try to get rid of all of it. But anger should not be our go-to emotion. Be slow to anger.

Likewise, the tongue. Speech is a gift. But unbridled speech destroys people. Like weeds that grow quickly with just a little water and sunlight, with just a little attention and energy slander and gossip can quickly spread and take over and cause great harm.

Even some of the items on Jesus's list are perversions of a good thing. Fornication has often been translated to apply to some relationships and not others. But really, it refers to exploitation. It's where we get the word porn. It's God's good gift gone bad. Avarice, or covetousness, is out of

control desire. A degree of desire is helpful. You don't reach any goal without a desire to get there. But avarice is desire that takes over and focuses on things that have no eternal use. Even pride can be useful. Please teach your children to be proud of themselves. But the pride mentioned here is pride that exalts the self at the expense of others. The Greek is "hyperephania," pride out of control.

So, we have a hard task in front of us, the task of discerning which things growing within us are harmful and which are helpful, which need to flourish and which be contained and then getting rid of the weeds. We are talking for the next several weeks at St. Thomas about home and housing. All homes have to be cleaned from time to time, even the homes of our hearts. We are wise to pay attention to these lists of weeds, consider whether they are alive within us, and seek to get rid of them.

This kind of internal cleaning can feel overwhelming. Like the weeds around my house, our internal weeds have to be pulled out by the root. Even then they may come back. You hope to catch them before they go to seed and spread but sometimes, sadly, we may not realize they are there until they cause harm. Really bad experiences with some of these weeds may function like temporary weed killer. If we get caught stealing we might be less inclined to steal again. But the roots and seeds and spores of evil remain within us all waiting for an opportunity to grow.

But thanks be to God there is a way to address these weeds of the heart. I'm no gardener, but my observation is that the best way to keep weeds from taking over again after you dig them up is to plant good plants. Plant the things you want to see and give them room to spread. Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

In the Episcopal Church, being doers of the word means living our Baptismal Covenant. To keep the weeds out, we commit ourselves to certain practices in baptism or confirmation and recommit ourselves every time someone is baptized. We promise to continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers. This is a promise to be part of a church community. We promise to persevere in resisting evil and whenever we fall into sin repent and return to the Lord. We promise to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ. We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons and love our neighbor as ourselves. We promise to strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being. These promises are like good plants growing within us, keeping the weeds at bay.

And while we may wish weeds would not flourish so easily in our yards, there is good news even in this. Weeds grow easily because the earth is fruitful. We live in a world where what is planted will grow, whether weed or flower. That's a good thing.

And the same is true for us. We are made for goodness. We are made so that God's life and love can flourish within us. When we clean out the weeds and make room for God, the life of God will grow within us. A holiness born of love will take over and spread. The fig tree will put forth its figs and the vines will blossom and give forth fragrance.

I haven't decided what to plant in front of the house where the weeds used to be. I know if I don't plant anything intentionally the wildness will come back, so I won't wait too long. We are here today to invite the love of God to be planted more deeply in all of us and to spread from us to others. When we come to the time of confession, work on getting rid of the weeds. And when we come to the altar, take the life God offers us all into yourself and let it grow.

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