

Weeds in the Garden of God

Galatians 5:13-26 by Patty Friesen (June 26, 2016)

Low German Reading and Translation: Jemies

I really don't like weeds. Ralph Waldo Emerson may be right that a weed is just a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered, but this philosophical tolerance doesn't help me much as I pull long threads of quack grass and the thistle pokes me and my back aches as I painstakingly bend over to surgically remove portulaca. Weeds, despite their undiscovered virtues are not welcome in my garden because they refuse to live side by side amiably with other plants. They are greedy. They want it all: all the space, all the soil, all the water, all the nutrients. And my poor struggling parsnips just can't push through the twining portulaca. I wish parsnips were tougher but they're wimps and just give up without much of a fight when choked out by these aggressive opponents. And weeds are tricky. They appear to die when you pull them, only to resurrect as soon as you turn your back. (Juengst, *Like a Garden*, p. 66) Weeds are highly adaptable and find a way to survive herbicides and carve out new niches in hostile environments, thriving wherever given an opportunity. What a pain.

Weeds are not a new problem. It's the Curse of Adam back in Genesis 3:17, when God told Adam, "Because you listened to the voice of your wife, and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat, accursed be the soil because of you. With suffering shall you get your food from it, every day of your life. It shall yield you brambles and thistles and you shall eat wild plants. With sweat on your brow shall you eat your bread, until you return to the soil as you were taken from it. For dust you are and to dust you shall return." It wasn't really Eve's fault – Adam and Eve were in it together

and because of them, we have weeds. In the book of Proverbs is a vivid description of what happens when lazy gardeners don't stay on top of the weeds. "I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person, and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; and the ground was covered with nettles." I'm sure Howard Boldt thinks that every time he passes by Terri Lynn and my plot at the Boldt Community Garden. It's a bit of a Mennonite Disaster out there.

In the Bible, at least 20 Hebrew words are used to describe prickly plants on the spectrum between thorns, briars, brambles and thistles. Thorny bushes grew in abundance and were used as fences to keep out animals and used as firewood. Even now in the Middle East, it is common to see donkey carts piled with dried thorn bushes for firewood. Isaiah frequently used thorns as a symbol for hardship and disaster. Describing the disaster related to Edom for example, "Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles over its fortresses." The thorny, nettely, thistly patches of land describe what is abandoned and untended because of war or neglect. Thorns represent trouble and pain and are in direct contrast to the Garden of Eden that God has intended for humankind where fruitful plants thrive and land is tended and loved and there is peace.

Closely related to thorns are nettles and thistles. The stinging nettle has evolved with an effective defense. On the surface of the leaves and stems are delicate hair-like needles. The tip of each needle is brittle, so when your fingers or ankles brush against it, it breaks off and the sharp point penetrates your skin and delivers the stinging chemicals. For years, the nettle sting was thought to be the same substance in the sting of red ants but research has shown that the main stinging chemicals are histamine, acetylcholine and

serotonin, all very good things. Histamine, treats allergies, rheumatism, stimulates blood circulation and clears chronic skin ailments. Acetylcholine could treat the deficiency of it in people's brains with Alzheimer's and of course, serotonin is a mood enhancer, which we could all use.

In addition, nettles are rich in protein, vitamins A and C, iron, potassium, and calcium. Most Europeans still consider nettles a spring tonic and Italians say that whoever wants a good supper should eat a weed of every kind. Nettles find their way into pasta and polenta and risotto. Wait a minute, are weeds redeemable? Could it be that despite Adam's curse, God has provided a way out, has provided healing properties within the weeds of my garden?

Jesus uses thorns, thistles and nettles in the parable of the sower to describe the cares of the world and the pleasures of life, the lure of wealth that choke out the openness to God's tender sprouts in our lives. Thorns are parallel to indifference or priorities oriented toward comfort or self-gratification, different directions than the quiet nudging of the Holy Spirit to reach out to others. But thorns speak to both individuals and communities on the things that threaten fruitful life. But the parable of the sower is a parable of optimism. It reminds us that despite indifference to God and churchy things, distractions and spiritual dryness; despite downsizing in Mennonite Church Canada, the word of God will bear fruit, and the fruit will be beyond our expectations. This is a parable of encouragement to parents who grieve over their children's preoccupation with the pleasures of life and lack of interest in a living faith. It is a parable of encouragement to churches and pastors who feel like no one gives a hoot about church anymore. It is a

parable of encouragement to denominations as they battle thorny budgets and downsizing. God's word grows beneath the thorns in new and surprising ways.

The parable of the thorns and nettles remind us of the ups and downs of our own faith journeys; of our first enthusiasm, whose ardor faded with time; of how doubt and confusion take root occasionally and the insidiousness of our culture of wanting just a little bit more, of valuing a good time above spiritual growth and reflection. We succumb to the temptations of our time and culture. It is the path of least resistance that choke out the disciplines of prayer and discernment and the hard work of being a community.

Apostle Paul of course struggled with his thorn in the flesh, something painful that afflicted his spiritual life. Most of us in times of physical pain or mental anguish, do the same thing, beg God to take the thorn out of our lives. But Paul received the answer that God's grace was sufficient, that God's power was made real through Paul's thorn. Life is thorny, it's how we see God in and around our thorns that makes the dynamic spiritual life. They remind us of our deep dependence on God and Jesus.

It is not a coincidence that the readily available instrument of torture for Christ was a thorn bush that was wove into a crown for derisive mockery of Jesus' claim to kingship. He literally wore the thorns of creation and human violence on his head. He knew the Curse of Adam intimately in its most physical and spiritual form. He wore our thorns so that he could transform them and heal them. He is the ultimate thorn bearer wearer and demonstrates for us the power of God's love over evil. He is truly a king but his executioners couldn't see the power beneath the thorny crown. Let us give our thorns to him. He knows what to do with them.

Which brings us to Galatians 5 and the list of weeding that needs to be done if we are to produce the fruits of the Spirit in the form of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Even if our weeds are not licentiousness, sorcery, drunkenness and carousing, most of us could stand some weeding of jealousy, anger, quarrels, and factions. Acknowledging the weeds within as symbols of our own imperfections, remind us that our spiritual and marital and communal lives cannot be weed-free unless we exert our personal awareness and spiritual energies to keep the weeds under control.

I've just come back from a Friesen family reunion in northern Alberta and talk about weeds of family life – weeds of sarcasm, anger and bossiness! And we were only together for 3 days! At one point I had to pray for calm and patience – that God would help me with my thorny impatience and snarky responses to siblings. We are in our 50's now and should know better but old habits die-hard and it had gotten so bad that my sister suggested we drive separately to our hometown hours away. That's ridiculous, I said. I'll try to be aware of my impatience if you can be aware of your talking too much. God's work of weeding continues in the Friesen family. Let us pray...

Gracious God, who loves us so much you have given the weeds of our gardens and fields some healing properties for us if we can learn what they are. Thank you for the tenacity, adaptability and resilience of weeds and the wild wisdom of nature that we will need in our uncertain future. Thank you also that there is healing in the psychological and spiritual weeds in our hearts and relationships at home, church, work and in the world. Be to us a tender Gardener to help us heal, grow and be fruitful. Amen.