

Proper 11 Year A 2014

Damn weeds!... Our garden is more beautiful than I can ever remember... It has an infinite variety of color and texture... It is mysterious beautiful, full of surprises... It doesn't look like I thought it would; it never does... It looks beyond what I had imagined... It is an improbable joy... And by, our garden, I don't just mean our garden on Conti St. I mean the garden we have always had.... On Texas Street... on Ratherview and Cuernavaca in Austin... on Twin Oaks Lane and Lamont Circle in Dothan... It is as if we have a garden always with us... always looking for a place to be planted and take root, and flourish.... I look at the garden and just see the arresting beauty... When Katharine looks at it, she sees the weeds... I've got to get after them, she says.... That's probably because she does all the work.... But in truth there is no garden that is not beset with the damned weeds.

Such a metaphor is not lost on the writer of Matthew's gospel. Indeed his audience lives an agricultural life... a life acquainted with weeds... their very livelihood nurtured and challenged by the random fecundity of nature... and in their ministries as early Jewish Christians, in their life's work of carving out in their world an egalitarian life, a life of dignity and well being, and freedom from the dispossession of empire... they are beset with failure and danger, and doubt... weeds... The revolution, the revolution prophesied by their sages over their tradition... Jesus' prophesy as well, hasn't come to pass... The iron hand of the Romans threatens all they hold dear... They know people, friends, first hand who have lost their lives for the cause... the Temple has been destroyed... they live under marshal law... Up and against the beautiful vision of a life with meaning and agency and happiness, the life for which Jesus gave his life and ministry... up against such a vision is the structure of oppression, institutionalized greed self interest and violence... evil Matthew rightly calls it... For their proverbial garden that might yet be, their hopes that they carry always... there are the damned weeds.

The metaphor holds true for us, does it not... We live in a culture that has somehow bought the lie, that life can and should be... for lack of a better word... perfect... that our lives are meant to go according to plan.... Perfect marriages, perfect children, perfect jobs, a perfect house... the perfect phone. The mega church makes a living, packs'em in, preaching that if one just believes, just believes with enough faith, then life will go according to plan, that prosperity and blessing will abound... that the garden will flourish without those useless and pesky weeds.... That is an illusion of course... and yet we persist in our obsessive compulsive pursuit of a right order... Let's keep at it until we get it right... this road to perfection is our modern western paradigm.... But we are not called to be right, we are called to be true. There is a world of difference.

The gospels of course still maintain their countercultural edge, yesterday and today. Matthew is speaking to his community in the midst of their travail... he's giving them a pep talk as it were.... Because they have found that this life of faith to which they have given themselves over... ain't easy... It is the hard road, fraught with danger and disappointment. Up and against this vision of God's kingdom breaking into our world, a kingdom of justice, dignity and well being and shalom (shalom being peace, wholeness, completion)... is the seemingly powerful, intractable resistance to all that is beautiful and true... Matthew is telling us that that is the world we live in... That we will never get it right... that the world will never be... right. The world is like a garden... Its beauty will always exist along with the weeds... the damned weeds.

So the garden metaphor is important to Matthew. There's tremendous energy around it... the protagonist being the sower of seeds... Jesus the sower, and perhaps more importantly, those who follow, sowers as well... In the lectionary we were assigned the story of the good seed and the weeds... and then the lectionary elves skipped to the interpretation... What we skipped were two important stories... the story of the mustard seed and the story about yeast... both of these stories speak of miraculous growth... the ability of seeds and yeast to grow and flourish exponentially... seeds and yeast that grow and ramify beyond our imagination... In the case of the mustard seed... giving shelter... in the case of the yeast, giving sustenance... That's important for our parable, because it is in our sowing and leavening that life ramifies... exponentially, the resistance notwithstanding.

What then are the seeds, the leaven that the metaphor points to... What are these seeds that germinate and grow into the very kingdom of God... What is the leaven that would engender nurture and sustenance for our world... Well I am convinced that the vast sweep of scripture, the elaborate mythologies, the histories, the poetry, the contradictions, the exultation and despair... shining vision and fear... the vast sweep of this literature and the tradition of interpretation around it, point to just one thing... It points to the one seed in need of being planted... and that is love of our neighbor... You can toss theology and creeds aside, and when all is said and done, what stands unchallenged as to a mandate of what it means to be faithful... is to take care of our neighbor... We need not look to some grand supernatural monolith of belief... We need only to heed the words of the patriarchs and matriarchs and prophets and the words and life of Jesus... that what brings the kingdom of God to fruition is in our loving our neighbor. That's it... And like seeds, there are infinite varieties of how we might love our neighbor... That in each small, mustard seed of kindness and compassion and mercy, the fruits of love, the fruits of love, mysterious and beautiful, ramify beyond our knowing and transform the world... no less... Do you believe that?

I say not to look for some grand icon of belief, but in fact there is nothing more grand, nothing more beautiful, nothing more profound, no greater privilege, than a small act of sacrifice for our neighbor who is brother... who is sister, of the

same DNA, same substance as we... and that goes for the planet as well, same substance... In the grand scheme of things there is nothing more profound than a simple act of love... that is why in the mythologies of our sacred lore there are metaphors of crossing seas on dry land, manna from heaven, a ladder of commerce between heaven and earth, water into wine, walking on water, resurrected dead bodies... those grand metaphors point to the awesome truth of who we are, that in our taking care of each other the creation is set right, that the kingdom of God comes in each and every act of love.... That life through acts of love, overcomes death... and that truth is worthy of our highest metaphorical speculation.

And then there are the damned weeds. There is also the truth of the matter that goodness will be challenged by evil... and the kingdom of God, I think Matthew is saying, must coexist with it... And though it will not be rooted out... God willing, in our obedience to the gospel, our obedience to the practice of love, it will be forever overcome.

The life we have been so graciously given is like a garden, mysterious, beautiful, full of surprises, vibrant... and beset with weeds... but if one works along with the process that is a garden... A garden, indeed, is not an end, but a process... If one but trusts the process of sacrifice, the process of love, which is to care deeply, to act with care... then we will see in our own time that beauty can never be vanquished... that life overcomes death... Any gardener will tell you that the beauty of a garden, wherever it is planted, is worth all the weeds, that faithful sowing is something to live for.... It is the very work of redemption that will draw all things to God... nothing lost... that there is nothing unloved in the heart of God... even those damned weeds.