

“Pulling Weeds”

Genesis 2: 15 – 17; 3: 1-7

Matthew 4: 1 – 11

March 5, 2017 First Sunday in Lent

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Our Lenten journey has begun. For some of us that beginning was marked by a smear of ashes on our foreheads, that ritual of remembering both our mortality and that we have missed the mark in living days of God’s fullness and are in need of turning around. Lent always begins with that reminder. And each first Sunday in Lent, we begin with the same scripture story, perhaps from another gospel but always the same story; with Jesus in the wilderness. Let’s remember that ‘wilderness’ in Biblical language isn’t a place of rest, vacation. Wilderness in Biblical language signifies ‘struggle’; 40 years of wandering in the wilderness for the children of Abraham, 40 days in the desert wilderness for Jesus. We can think of it either metaphorically or literally, those wilderness places in our lives, places and times of struggle.

And so, knowing this, is it any surprise that so many of us walk into the season of Lent with an attitude of,

“Here we are, Lent again (sigh!)”. Do you ever feel like that, Lent again? Like life isn’t heavy enough as it is? We tell ourselves that it’s a time to confess our sins and give up chocolate and neither of those is much fun!

No, ‘fun’ is not a word that I would use to describe this season. Rather, more fitting would be the words “meaningful”, “constructive”, “significant”, “deep”, “necessary”. We can see parallels in our journey through Lent with Jesus’ time in the wilderness; that it is to be a time of being Spirit led, that struggle and work is a part of it, that through that we come face to face with our own devils. But the journey doesn’t have to be one of maudlin penitence. We can think of it as ‘spiritual spring cleaning’ if you will; allowing ourselves to ‘clear the chaos and the clutter’ to find ‘the quiet center’ as the hymn goes.

Or, yet another metaphor which we will be building upon during these weeks of Lent; this a time of soul gardening.

Speaking of ‘gardening’, we have our other scripture reading for today, that garden reading! The scripture we heard is often labeled by so many as ‘the fall’. Just like in the story of Jesus in the wilderness, the word ‘temptation’ appears again. Unlike Jesus, Adam and Eve failed the test, they ate of the apple, that was the ‘original sin’ and from that we are all ‘sinners’. But I invite you to think of this story as so much more; that it’s about human brokenness. Our faith story holds the premise that we were created in goodness and love which is God and somehow have strayed from that goodness and love. That we were created to ‘till the garden’ to

care for God's creation; to love and protect and serve God's creation; to do God's work in the world and we become distracted from our original purpose; to be agents of love and goodness. Each and every day God and each and every Lent, God calls us back to that purpose, "Repent, return."

How many of you consider yourself gardeners? How many gardener wannabes if you just had the time or energy or the knees you once years ago? For the next few weeks, we're going to be gardening. The good news is, you won't be getting your hands dirty nor will you need those young knees that you once had. We are going to be about soul gardening: cultivating discipleship, so that we can experience the bounty of God's garden that is there for us. And the first step involves dealing with some pesky weeds.

Maybe you are like me. I go out on that first warm Spring day with shovel and seeds in hand, ready to turn over the soil and plant only to find a bunch of weeds that have taken off. So, the first thing that I, and we, need to do when gardening, is to get rid of the weeds.

Weeds. We may call them temptations. What are weeds? As mentioned in the children's message, they are plants that are out of place; where we don't want them to be. Maybe we can see them as those things in our lives that have made their way to the center, where we know they aren't supposed to be; instead of tucked over in the corner, they've somehow made their way out into the middle of the floor and we begin to trip over them since they're in the way. Perhaps our careers? Our own self importance? Our financial security? Our pasts? Our desire for the future?

And just like weeds, these things that often take root where they're not supposed to be then tend to take over, to take up space, not allowing for those more life giving plants to grow. Weeds tend to choke out new life, that which is trying to grow in the moment. There are so many varieties of weeds. In the story of Jesus in the wilderness, we saw the weeds of material wealth, safety and security, ego...none of these bad in themselves, a part of the plant world, ok if able to be contained. But that's the thing about weeds. Once they get root, they often spread and grow quickly, choking out that which is healthy and life giving.

I can't name your weeds. That is your work in this first part of your Lenten journey. You will need to make time to look out over this garden of life that is yours and identify your weeds. What is it that is not where it's supposed to be, that is taking up too much room in your life, in your thoughts, that is choking out the possibility of a life of wholeness which God desires for each of us? Could it be an addiction? Perhaps a fear? Maybe not being able to trust in God but needing to trust only in yourself? Oh, this work of Lent is not easy.

So, after we've identified the weeds, then what? Then the 'weeding out' begins; pulling, getting rid of, making space for that which is life giving to grow. Throughout my many years of gardening, some more successful than others, I've learned a thing or two that can be used as metaphors for our spiritual gardening. For example, I've learned that just as a quick tug of the part of the weed at the surface that one sees clearly does not get rid of the weed, neither does a quick fix of what is choking us spiritually usually amount in success. Oh, it may for awhile. But if we don't dig down deep to get to the roots, then we know the weed will make its appearance again. I'm reminded of the drug addict who goes through a thirty-day treatment center, comes out sober/clean but decides not to go to follow up 12 step meetings that will get at the root of the weed of addiction. I think of how one may realize that their lashing out at another is not nice and so strive not to do it again, without getting at the root of their own insecurities and fears that cause that weed to grow in the first place.

So, in addition to identifying the weeds in your garden, how can you get to the roots? Most often that involves some kind of tool, we can't just do it with our bare hands. As often as we try to 'go it alone', to pull our weeds without assistance of some kind, be it a garden tool or another person or spiritual discipline, we often fail.

Oh, I know, there's Round-Up! Or any other chemical that promises quick and lasting results but also has the affect of killing other plants around it. I'm not sure that in our cultivating discipleship, any broad-based treatment of our weeds will really do the job without affecting other areas of our garden. And it cuts down on the work we have to do; in this case, work that is necessary in order to get the results desired.

The results? A closer relationship with God as in able to see the beauty of the moment – the 'Holy in each moment', as in able to see the Holy in each other and ourselves as we live lives of forgiving and forgiveness, as in having space for newness to bloom and grow. Oh, yes, it takes work, but I do believe it's worth it! And may we always remember that the prayer we pray each Sunday is 'lead us not into temptation' my paraphrase is 'into not letting the weeds take over'. The prayer is not, 'lead us not into the struggle' or the work that is to be done.

So here we go, on this first step. Throughout this week, I invite you to think about what weeds may be growing in your garden. Then the next step would be to reflect on how those weeds can be pulled out by the roots, how you can begin to dig deep. As we begin this journey, we rest in the assurance that we are led by the Spirit!

Led by the Spirit always, gracious Spirit, dwell with us...let us pray and let us sing!