Weeds and Thorns

July 4th, 2021

A weed field was a paradise in early life. In the summer, empty fields would have high silver grass and weeds, and I would wander through bogs and abandoned areas to play games. Not far from my house there were woodlands and a great field of irises under the open sky worthy of Vincent van Gogh. And further on, a stretch of land along the Atsubetsu River that was overgrown and full of wonders to explore. One might find strange treasures there—rusted soda cans, discarded tools, strange things that people had left behind, tadpoles whipping about in pools of water or mud. In the evenings, there were great orchestras of frogs—one of the greatest sounds on earth besides wind, waves, streams, cicadas, dripping forests, or crunching autumn leaves. One summer, I had the misfortune of getting lost along a mountain stream near Ashibetsu, and I discovered how painful certain kinds of thorny bushes, bamboo, bracken and weeds could be. I managed to find my way back to the gravel lot where our bus was parked, where the other school kids were happily eating shaved ice or ice cream as if nothing in the world had happened. I was still a bit exhausted, terrified, and covered in scratches from thorns, brambles and other mysterious vegetation. The experience was the literal thorn in the flesh. In our reading today, the apostle Paul is boasting of visions—not because he wanted to boast, but he was responding to the arrogance of certain people in the Corinthian church who had discarded his teaching and were assigning authority to other teachers based on what seem to be fairly shallow standards. Paul had a good many reasons to boast—he was probably one of the most intelligent people in the 1st Century, and in the long-term, certainly the most influential writer of the 1st Century. And, he was a visionary—certainly given his experience on the road to Damascus, but perhaps also from other events, if the person he speaks of today was in fact himself: “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses” (2 Corinthians 12:2-5). Imagine—after defending himself and boasting of his knowledge, experiences, spiritual gifts and now a vision—for a total of thirty-eight verses over two chapters, Paul shuts it all down, saying: “I will not boast, except in my weaknesses”.

Weakness—Paul is glorifying weakness. And to make it even more confusing, he starts to speak of thorns in the flesh: “Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). I do not recall the source, sadly, but I once read an article by a Jesuit spiritual director who said that Dante Alighieri and Ignatius of Loyola were essentially the forerunners of the video game industry—by looking at the spiritual life as a quest of growth from one level to the next. Narratologically, perhaps there are times when our spiritual growth seems like that. And yet, Paul’s comment here is nothing like that at all. If anything, Paul’s comment is a bit closer to *King Lear* by William Shakespeare—for it is on the heath, in the middle of a storm, when he has nothing—no kingdoms, no armies, no riches, no power, and not much sanity left, that King Lear begins to find wisdom in weakness. What was Paul’s weakness? What was his “messenger of Satan”? Was it a spirit that brought about depression, as we read of in the story of King Saul? Was it distractions during his prayer time? Was it unrequited love? Was it an unfulfilled dream, such as going to Bithynia or sailing away to Spain? I do not know. I do not believe it was a sin—because Paul never glorifies nor defends sin in any way, even as he preaches grace. Whatever it was, it was a weakness, a weakness that could easily lead to sin and despair, something that tormented him. And he did what every sensible follower of Christ would do—he prayed to God to ask God to remove it. And God did not. God left it right where it was, saying: “My grace is sufficient for you.” God did not remove the weakness. God did not remove the weakness.

When I got lost along the mountain stream in Ashibetsu as a child, the landscape had physically imprinted itself on me in a way that was unforgettable. Later on, I would learn that weeds are not welcome when you are trying to grow flowers or vegetables. Blackberries are delicious, but harvesting them can be painful if you are careless, as I often am, and if you want to grow anything else, you might not want things like blackberry or bamboo nearby your garden. Dandelions, while beautiful, were a threat to the silver grass where I was raised. It is therefore important to distinguish between good thorns and bad weeds. Weakness and sin are different. In the Parable of the Sower, we learn that there is a danger to thorny weeds: “And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing” (Mark 4:18-19). These are not the good thorns; they are those things that will damage our souls. Sin is sin—it separates us from God and from each other; it breaks down our love for God and our love for one another. That is why Christ had to take it away. And yet, Christ did not come to take away weakness. Though he was perfect in every way, Christ came to us as a weak infant, as a poor carpenter, as a misfit teacher that was laughed at, as a king on a donkey without an earthly kingdom, as a man crucified like a common criminal. Through weakness, Christ revealed the power of the gospel, the saving power of God.

I could talk about my weaknesses for hours, but most of them are so obvious, there really is no need, and I do not really want to bore or burden everybody. My poor children have a lot of patience with me. I am a forty-four year old man who, for various reasons, only has a learner’s driving license—that should say it all. Nevertheless, I would like to illustrate the point with one or two other examples from my life history. My first attempts at writing were during church services. I would watch my mother taking notes on little pieces of paper as she followed the sermon with her Bible open. The curlicues and slanted lines fascinated me, and she was kind enough to give me my own notepad and pens to imitate her and keep me busy during the long and fairly boring and unintelligible sermons. I loved the *m*’s and *n*’s—they were almost indistinguishable to me, but perhaps they looked like mountains or hills or something, and I covered page after page with my interpretation of cursive *m*’s and *n*’s. I loved writing, and it was not long before I could read and wanted to be a writer. My father had taught me to read, and often read to me in the evenings. The world of words seemed infinite and beckoned to me. It was with great shock, therefore, that I failed my Grade 1 English Handwriting class. After the shock wore off, and I kept writing, it was with great despair that I failed my Grade 2 Handwriting. Nevertheless, I persisted in writing—I filled notebooks with stories and poems and tried to improve my handwriting, despite being told I was making no progress whatsoever. And then, when I knew I was leaving Hokkaido after Grade 3, I felt that it was a landmark moment. I would certainly cross the Pacific Ocean with the A in handwriting I had so desired. Life is mysterious. With great heartbreak, I failed Grade 3 Handwriting. I was beginning to dislike the letter U—it stood for “Unsatisfactory”—and it felt that if something so deeply tied to my heart and my life was “Unsatisfactory”, then perhaps I was unsatisfactory. My progress in Japanese handwriting was a bit different, but no less sad. I started off doing very well. I learned the *hiragana* and *katana* letters—and my instructor, the kindest woman in the world—gently taught me where to improve, but did not fail me whatsoever. And then we had calligraphy classes. This was even more exciting—I loved the ink, the fresh, soft paper, the feel of the brush. And in the early days, I did not fare too badly. One day, a wealthy girl lost her temper with me, however. My family did not have a lot of money, and I had a favourite white shirt that in seconds became her canvas as she repeatedly flung ink at me, covering me and my one, good white shirt with ink. At the end of the tantrum, she even applied the brush to my shirt. The teacher was not present at that moment, and the girl was never reprimanded. My shirt was finished. My joy in calligraphy class was finished. Had I known we were doing calligraphy beforehand, I might not have worn the white shirt. The incident was like a curse. My poor calligraphy got worse. I learned more and more characters, and I could read increasingly difficult books, but my hands shook, my lines were disproportionate. To this day, I am not a good calligrapher whatsoever. It is painful to admit, but it is true. I would often ask God in prayer—how can it be that I am utterly useless with something I love so much? I don’t have an answer for that. One night, some years ago, I was in the teacher’s lounge of a non-profit society downtown, where I taught English to immigrants and refugees, and I was sitting at the computer preparing my lessons. I was typing up paragraphs—probably writing samples for my students. Suddenly, I began to feel very strange. I stopped, and turned to look, and all of the teachers were staring at me as if I were a ghost or an alien. “What’s wrong?” I asked. And they said that they had never seen anyone type that fast. I laughed and said that they must be mistaken, and went back to typing, but felt strange again, and looked, and they were still staring. Apparently, I was rather fast. And I realized sometime later, that after the Grade 3 debacle, I had started typing my stories on old discarded typewriters and later on with 80’s model computer keyboards. I had become a typist without intending to. Typing, however, was not the best gift from my struggles with handwriting. One night, at the same organization, I had to teach a nineteen year-old woman how to write numbers and the alphabet. When I first approached the table, I saw the look in her eyes, and my heart broke. I thought I recognized that look—the sense of fear, the sense of shame, the disappointment. She had seen the giant U before. She felt unsatisfactory. She was illiterate, and she was an illiterate woman from an industrialized country. Her illiteracy was perhaps the result of poverty and other social factors. Before we started, I made some lame jokes, and she started to laugh. For several hours, we went through one letter after another, one numeral after another. It was painfully boring for both of us, but we got through it without the giant U, without the shame or despair. And I felt honoured and privileged to have been there to help her in a small way. I don’t know if I could have helped her if I had not had some experience of frustration and failure before. Our pain, our thorns, can be the vessels of grace for others. Another thing happened, which I hope will be of help to some. One evening years ago, I went down to the Daiso department store in Richmond for the first time. To my great excitement, I found affordable ink, paper, brushes—all the necessities for Japanese calligraphy. I brought the tools and supplies home and began to practice again. I made no progress whatsoever. To this day, I am not very good. Once in a while, I get a good character out, but overall, my work is still pretty bad. The good news is—it does not matter—because there is very little under heaven besides prayer and reading the word of God—that gives me such peace, such joy, and such pleasure. I can even pray as I let the brush drift over the paper without a care in the world. Something timeless happens. And though these are very trivial stories about weakness, the theme is the same for the more painful and difficult weakness with which we struggle—our weaknesses can become strengths, our weaknesses can become means by which we find new inner resources, by which we acquire tools to help others, by which we draw closer to God.

That was a long-winded story, but I hope that it makes some sense of what Paul says when he writes: “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). In his first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31); and to the Galatians, he said: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14). Beware the thorny weeds—those temptations that pull you away from God. There are things that the Holy Spirit does not want us to do (Galatians 5). There are things that the Holy Spirit will not let us do (Acts 16). And there are things that the Holy Spirit will not take away or heal (2 Corinthians 12). And if God is indeed working all things for our good (Romans 8), then the Holy Spirit leaves us with our weakness that we may become strong in the Lord, filled with the Lord, remade in the likeness of Christ, who came in weakness, struggled with our burdens, and died for us to make us eternal, pure, redeemed, and made holy in the grace of God.

Weakness is the gateway to prayer and possibility. I have learned to pray differently. I have used the illustration before, but I will use it again. I think of the way broken ceramics are mended in Japan: 金継ぎ or 金繕い, "golden repair"—the cracks of the pottery are filled with gold (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kintsugi>). When I feel empty, I pray to God and ask God to fill my cracks and emptiness with his molten gold and light. When I wonder how my life is progressing, I stop and pray about the sower and the seed. And if the farmer sows the seed and does not know how it grows (Mark 4:26-29), and if I sow the seed and do not know how it grows under the earth in the hearts of others, then I certainly do not really know how it grows within me. And I should abandon myself to this mystery. I need the seed—so I let the scriptures and other Christians sow it in me. And then I just stop worrying and wait to see what God will grow. Without the seed, nothing will grow, and nothing will survive the thorny weeds or the thorn in the flesh, but with the seed, with the grace of God, the mystery of the earth and the mystery of thorns and weeds will become something joyous, something peaceful, something golden and beautiful in the Lord. That is what I pray for myself; that is what I pray for you, for my children, for all of us who walk with Christ, and for those who do not yet walk with Christ. There is a season for everything, but there is one thing that is timeless, that is always relevant, in season and out of season, one thing that is good for all seasons—to hear the Lord and to trust His grace, to desire his salvation and friendship. Jesus is enough. Jesus loves you. That is sufficient for you and for me. It is true goodness and love.