The Thorns

March 20th, 2022

3rd Sunday of Lent

I have been lost in the brambles before, struggling to hike through every kind of weed imaginable—in Hokkaido and British Columbia. And I have worn myself out trying to repair gardens, trying to free the earth from being strangled by invasive weeds. Once, in the old town of Hikone, only a stone’s throw from an old, elegant, and beautiful castle, I had to clean a ditch that was clogged with mud and weeds like you would not believe. Water had not rushed through there in years because of the thick, muddy tangle of weeds and their roots. Thorns and weeds drain your life of time, energy, and even your own blood—they can be giant obstacles to your goal—reaching a certain destination on your hike, or growing something beautiful and nutritious. Weeds and thorns have their place in the environment, but they are not wanted where you are trying to grow certain vegetables or grains. They are dominating and unmerciful. Likewise, the cares and temptations of this world are dominating and unmerciful. They strangle us, choking the life out of anything else that would like to grow in a particular patch of soil. I love to eat blackberries, but they are incredibly invasive, thorny, and difficult. They furnish a ready-made symbol of mass conformity, invasive greed, intolerance, brute power, and labyrinthine darkness—a rather accurate image of what happens to an individual, a community, or a culture that has become overrun by its own fears and desires. That is where we are today. In his Parable of the Sower, Jesus says: “Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain… 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 4:7, 18-19).

The cares of the world, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things—these are what make the land unsuitable for the growth of the gospel in our hearts. In moral theology, we look at our lives through three kinds of goods: the goods of the body, external goods and the goods of the soul. All of our vices spring like weeds from a disordered relationship to these three kinds of goods. In most cases, our desires for the goods of the body and external goods choke out our desire for the goods of the soul. The goods of the body are straightforward—food, warmth, sleep, physical affection and satisfaction. External goods involve our money and our property. Our academics, economics, and our politics are expressly designed these days to cater to these two kinds of goods in an inappropriate way. Moreover, they are not designed to help us seek the goods of the soul. They are not designed to protect our access to the goods of the soul. In our responses to the three goods, we experience eleven emotions according to St. Thomas Aquinas: love, desire, joy, hope, daring, hate, aversion, sorrow, despair, fear, and anger. All of these emotions are necessary for our rationality, but through sin and weakness, they get disordered, especially when they are not governed by rationality and the spiritual life, by the word of God and the Holy Spirit. Ingeniously our culture has managed to effect what Arthur Rimbaud once described poetically: “The idea is to reach the unknown by the derangement of all the senses.” Our senses and emotions fire away, but they are improperly ordered or aimed, and thus we find ourselves increasing in emotional instability, confusion, and deeper degrees of habitual sin and despair. And habitual sin is not just the monopoly of the drunkards, gluttons, fornicators, and drug addicts. Habitual sin involves lying, boasting, preening, judging, gossiping, manipulating, pontificating, disobeying, disrespecting, hating, bullying, abusing, faithlessly fearing, slacking, scoffing, mocking, resisting the Holy Spirit, and resisting the word of God. All habitual sin reflects a choking out of the word of God. All habitual sin reflects a soul distracted from what it is meant to do. The soul is meant to grow the seed, the word of God, and to produce a harvest of salvation, for itself and others.

The soul is meant to receive and grow the seed of the gospel. One significant part of the gospel is this very fact of human existence—human beings were designed to receive God the way the soil receives the seed. The Lord God made us out of earth. One balks at such simplicity because one wishes to define one’s own existence. One of the hardest lessons of life is to be who you are, to accept who you are. At different stages of childhood and adolescence, I dreamed of being different things. A calligrapher, a baseball player, a musician, an architect, a pilot. I had calligraphy lessons; I hung out with an old calligrapher who exhibited in Sapporo. I played baseball in the park with my friends; I had piano and guitar lessons; I read books about famous architects and drew my own designs; I studied aviation out of a textbook lent to me by my math tutor, who was a helicopter pilot. But I was not called to be any of those things. I did not grow and excel in those things, and no amount of desiring them helped. Dedication, practice and life circumstances might have helped—but I suspect other factors were involved. God knew me better than I knew myself. It was perhaps not until I surrendered my life more to God that I found out what is most important about being and becoming. The more I obsessed about what I should be, the less I was what I should be, and the less I grew in the virtues that would help me be. Why not be kind? Why not be hardworking? Why not listen to the Lord? You cannot define your own existence. You can try, and you can even believe the results of your attempts—but the endeavor makes no sense, rationally or theologically. The real struggle comes about when we discover we are creatures trying to define ourselves in a world that is trying to define us. The cares of the world are not just practical cares; the greatest cares of the world are existential, philosophical, theological cares—but they often masquerade as practical, every day cares and temptations. In any case, they strangle. They especially strangle us when they try to become our identity. The *great derangement*, if I may steal and repurpose a word from Amitav Ghosh, is not so much about our perception of facts as it is about our perception of our world, ourselves and our neighbours, of God. None of these are for us to define. All belongs to God; you and I belong to God. Everything belongs to God.

The great Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, tells several parables in his upbuilding discourses that relate to our condition. One is about a lily. In the story of the lily, a bird comes along to where the lily grows among nettles, and starts to tell the lily about a fantastic meadow where crown imperial lilies blossom in utmost glory. The lily begins to think that it should go there somehow—that it cannot really be a lily until it gets to that other meadow. It cannot possibly be a lily here among the nettles. The bird continues to feed the lily’s hopes and anxieties: “One evening, they agreed that the next morning they would change things in such a way as to put an end to all the worry and anxiety. Early the next morning, the little bird came and with his beak pecked away the soil from the lily’s roots so that it was set free. When he had done this, the bird took the lily under his wing and flew off. The agreement was that the bird would fly with the lily to the place where the splendid lilies blossomed. Once they were there, the bird would once more be of service by planting it there, so that the change of place and the new environment might help the lily to become a splendid lily along with all the others—or perhaps even a crown imperial, envied by all the others. Alas, as they were going, the lily withered up. Had the anxious lily been content with being a lily it would never have become anxious, and if it had not become anxious it would have remained standing where it stood—where it stood in all its loveliness. If it had remained standing there, then it would have been the very lily about which the priest spoke on Sunday when he repeated the words of the gospel: ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.’ If it were not so, the gospel would make no sense at all.” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings,* tr. George Pattison. New York: HarperPerennial, 2010. 96). In explaining his parable, Kierkegaard says: “The wicked little bird represents the restless thoughts aroused by comparing oneself with others, thoughts that roam far and wide, inconstant and unpredictable, gathering all the unwholesome knowledge there is to be had about differences. And just as the bird didn’t think to put himself in the lily’s place, no more do we when we make acts of comparison, whether by putting ourselves in another’s place or putting another in our place. The little bird is the poet, the seducer, or what is poetic and seductive in a person. The poetic is like the bird’s discourses, true and untrue, poetry and truth. For it is indeed true that there are differences, and that there is much to say about them, but it is poetic license to say impassionedly that the differences are what is highest, whether one says it in despair or triumph, for this is eternally untrue” (97). Later, Kierkegaard concludes: “All worldly anxiety has its basis in human beings being unwilling to be content with being human” (99). What does it mean to be human? It is to be like the soil in which the grain is buried. It is to receive one’s identity, one’s definition, one’s instruction, one’s purpose, one’s end, one’s glory—to receive it all the way the soil receives the grain. It is to receive it all from the Sower, from God the Father our creator. When we refuse to receive, or when we allow other things to grow to such an extent that we cannot receive, we cannot really be the rich soil that grows the crops to the glory of God.

Many would say that such simplifications do not help in a confusing and complicated world. And yet, such arguments sound more like temptations to embrace the confusion, the medicine that poisons rather than the medicine that cures. It is hard for us to confess that we summon the weeds and thorns, that perhaps we have a bit more control over the soil than we like to admit. In fact, in our times, we glorify and identify with the weeds and thorns. In our hearts, perhaps we know secretly, that we want to be weeds and thorns! No wonder nothing can grow for very long. Assemble as many arguments as you want, God did not call you to become your cares and your temptations. That is the world’s teaching and your desiring. The Sower is sowing grain—not blackberries, not morning glories, not lolium, not dandelions. The Sower sows grain and wants a harvest of grain. It is really not up to us to argue with the Sower—it’s His land, His seed. It’s His parable! Why would we think we could argue with Him? Why would we think we could understand what He intends? And why would we think that we were wiser or better than Him? (cf. Job 40:2). Seed needs soil to grow. Our existential task is to be soil, to grow the seed. Not to be the weeds and thorns. The world does not know you and you do not know you—how then can you decide what you are to be by reading the signs of the weeds and thorns? They will only tell you to be weeds and thorns. They will not tell you who you really are or who you need to be. Only God knows you, and only God can make you flourish.

The saddest situation is when we have allowed the thorns to blind us to our state; when the thorns and weeds make us think that we are still growing, still healthy, still able to produce a crop someday, when we are desperately drowning in the briars. The human capacity for self-deception is tremendous. That is why we must rely on God and turn to God. As the Scriptures says: “You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men” (1 Kings 8:39); “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7); “the righteous God tries the hearts and minds” (Psalm 7:9). In his book *Works of Love,* Kierkegaard tells another parable about our self-deception. It is called “The Man Who Walked Backwards”: “When a man turns his back upon someone and walks away, it is so easy to see that he walks away, but when a man hits upon a method of turning face toward the one he is walking away from, hits upon a method of walking backwards while with appearance and glance and salutations he greets the person, giving assurances again and again that he is coming immediately, or incessantly saying ‘Here I am’—although he gets farther and farther away by walking backwards—then it is not so easy to become aware. And so it is with the one who, rich in good intentions and quick to promise, retreats backwards farther and farther from the good. With the help of intentions and promises he maintains an orientation toward the good, he is turned towards the good, and with this orientation the good he moves backwards farther and farther away from it. With every renewed intention and promise, it seems as if he takes a step forward, and yet he not only remains standing still but really takes a step backward. The intention taken in vain, the unfulfilled promise leaves a residue of despondency, dejection, which perhaps soon again flares up in more passionate protestations of intention, which leave behind only greater languor. As a drunkard constantly requires stronger and stronger stimulation—in order to become intoxicated, likewise the one who has fallen into intentions and promises constantly requires more and more stimulation—in order to walk backward” (Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Parables of Kierkegaard,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978, 71). What a perfect image of the day and age we live in. Though we claim to be good soil, we cultivate weeds; though we claim to walk towards God, we are walking backward.

There is joy in the way forward, however, when we return to God. There is a way out. The truth will set us free. The only thing needful is to just become the soil. To be the creature who owes and reveres the Creator. The creature that lives by the grace of the Creator. The soul is meant to receive the seed and to produce a harvest. Once we are ready to be soil, nothing is lost. Time is not lost, for we live in God’s time. Energy is not lost because we have an eternal energy to outweigh the temporal loss of energy. Joy is not lost, even when we sorrow, for again, the sorrows of this world will not outweigh the glory to come. And most importantly, love is not lost. For in being soil we realize our neighbours are also soil—despite our many differences—political, economic, cultural, racial, existential, moral—we are all just soil in need of the Lord God’s grace, the grace that sends the rain and the sun, the grace that scatters the seed. For the Creator has already given you everything and will continue to give you everything, everything that you and the world cannot give, this is what our Creator and Saviour gives through Jesus Christ our Lord, the one who wore our thorns as a crown.