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Dear Friends,

Recently I was speaking with a friend who had done a stint of serious gardening work, and we came to talking about weeds.

Weeds happen. Weeds are part of the general environment—their seeds and spores seem to be everywhere. Weeds are not a symptom of a character flaw or a sign of moral failing. Having weeds sprout in your garden does not mean you have been careless or irresponsible.

Whatever else people say about weeds, everyone agrees that if you ignore them, they take over. Weeds are aggressively self-serving and will gradually take up the food, water, and even light in your garden and choke out whatever you had intended for that space. Pretending they are not there, hoping that they will go away, or at least not get any worse, on their own, or trying to convince yourself that they really are no threat, are all strategies for letting your garden become a weed patch. If you are serious about growing what you actually planted, you will be serious about getting rid of weeds. You may water and fertilize your plants, but if you do not pull the weeds, you are feeding not your plants, but the weeds that will kill them.

The Weekly Weeder If you are serious about getting the weeds, you will spend a fair amount of time on your knees. Pulling weeds is work, and if you want the work to be most effective, you will go after the deep roots of the weed as well as the leaves. It helps to have good tools.

Weeds keep coming back. Regardless of how effectively you remove them, somehow they keep reappearing. One heroic bout of weed-pulling will not last a whole season. Having a routine and a regular time for weeding probably produces the best results. Meaning to weed, reading about weeding, watching other people weed, and talking (or writing....) about weeding all have no impact on your garden. Probably getting started is the hardest part.

Personally, I confess to being an indifferent weeder. Being horticulturally semi-literate at best, in the early days, it is not entirely clear to me what is a weed and what is not. There are times when I wonder if redefining exactly what one means by “weed” might make more sense—perhaps developing (cultivating?) a broader sense of what belongs in the garden might be a preferable path.

The concept of “weed” is, after all, so restrictive and judgmental. And weeding just takes so much time.

What’s with all these fires? Is there any real urgency? In one story, Jesus suggests letting weeds and crops grow together to maturity, and then harvesting everything, throwing the weeds into the fire and gathering the grain into the barn (Matthew 13:24-30). (Matthew features a number of cautionary tales in which someone or something end up being thrown into the fire. Matthew suggests that there are many ways this can all turn out badly if we are not paying attention. If one begins to ask whether a weed is not something one sees, but may be something one is or might become, then this whole issue can become uncomfortable, and theologically much more complicated, very quickly.) There is something satisfying about pulling out a really big weed, but I suspect in that instance I am prioritizing feeling like I am making a difference over actually doing substantial good.

Let’s skip the paragraph in which I make the obvious connections between weeds and what they might represent, and go to what I hope might be a more interesting issue. Our daily lives are full of matters—like weeds, their dangers, and how to deal with them—which one need not have an advanced degree or a particularly subtle moral sensibility to understand. Basic experience and common sense provide substantial resources in making sense of our lives. Or, in theological terms, we can know a fair amount about God and how God works by observing the way the world functions from day to day. This perspective, sometimes called “Natural Theology,” is reflected near the beginning of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made...” (Romans 1:20)

The danger, and I think the trap into which we have fallen, is that in looking at the natural world and in looking at our own lives, we have given up looking for what might be behind them. We have settled for looking at ourselves, and at the observable mechanics of the world, rather than asking what might be beyond. Think “forest” and “trees” at this point for an illustration.

Galileo, Darwin, Thomas, and Jesus I do not know if we have ever properly understood the relationship between seeking to understand God and seeking to understand God’s creation. Galileo and Darwin had important insights to offer, and, to the extent that they were true, their research revealed something true about God. The subsequent separation of the pursuit of God and of science has offered a confusing amalgam of material benefits and spiritual deficits. Giving greater worldly power to people with fewer spiritual resources has proven to be a costly experiment.

Two thousand years ago Jesus engages the question of God and knowledge in a conversation with his disciples shortly before the crucifixion. In the passage we often read at funerals, Jesus assures his followers that though he must leave them, he will return to bring them to where he is going to prepare a place for them. He concludes (he probably thinks) by assuring them that “you know the way to the place where I am going.” After months of teaching them, it is a reasonable thing for Jesus to think. It’s not like this is new material. But Thomas, who often asks what we want to know, blurts out with what sounds like frustration tinged with just a hint of despair, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” How can we “know” the way (and note that Thomas uses “know” twice in his short speech) is a science question, the word “science” coming from the Latin verb *scire* “to know”.

Jesus does not give a science answer—he does not lecture or explain or work from simple concepts up to more complex ideas. He responds simply, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” As so often happens in John, Jesus’ response is frustratingly ambiguous for anyone who wants a “science” understanding. Jesus’ response is more of an invitation to further relationship, and a kind of exploration, than a settling of Thomas’s question. Jesus invites Thomas, and us, into a larger, and less familiar, way of thinking. (This conversation is found at John 14:1-7.)

This year Holy Week begins on April 1, and there is an April Fools quality to the whole sequence of events extending to Easter on April 8¹. Palm Sunday begins with an image which makes perfect sense to the world: a charismatic public figure enters into a highly charged social, religious, and political situation and prompts a great release of energy, expectation, and, among the old order, anxiety. So far, this story is unremarkable.

Dueling World Views But as the week progresses, Jesus, the figure at the center, acts with increasing clarity according to principles which are rooted not in the wisdom of the world, but in another way of understanding our individual and our community lives and another understanding of what constitutes truth, power, and life. And the world—represented by the unusual, and maybe unique, alliance of the crowds, the religious authorities, and the occupying imperial forces—asserts its power by deploying its resources and its ultimate threat, death, to defend its status and perspective. In Holy Week we see something like a duel between the proposition that the material world and pragmatic politics represent reality and the faith of Jesus that there is a deeper, and more powerful, order to the world than what we see and what can be done by whoever is the occupying power this year.

Death proves to be the trump card, the ultimate statement, of the world view based on materialism and on politics. When Jesus breathes his last, he has been dealt with and has passed from the scene.

That the story does not end there, and that we are still telling it is the testimony that being realistic is not finally realistic, and being pragmatic is not finally practical. The last word of the world is darkness and death; the last word of God is light and life. As the Gospel of John says in the beginning and shows at the end, the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:5)

Every year at Easter the media carry stories in which people turn to science either to prove or disprove the truth of the story, as if fitting the story—or not—into the categories and methodology of “science” would somehow finally make its meaning, authenticity, and power easy to accept or reject. Because God is larger than science, because the world in which Jesus lived and lives, and invites us to live, is larger than the world of the crowds, the priests, and the Romans, science will never explain God and the life of God. That inability does not invalidate science; it simply

¹ Paul plays with the paradox of the limits of wisdom, and the power of what seems unwise, near the beginning of 1 Corinthians: “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:20-25)

recognizes its limits. Easter invites us to a kind of intellectual humility—God is greater than we are and greater than our ability fully to understand or describe.

Coming back to earth The word “humility” comes from the Latin word “humus” which simply means “earth”. To be humble is to be close to the ground, or maybe even to acknowledge that our bodies are earth-bound. Dust we are, and to dust we return. As we say in the Commendation in the Burial Office, echoing the creation story of Adam (a word which means “earth” or “ground” in Hebrew) “we are mortal, formed of the earth, and unto earth shall we return.” (Genesis 2:7)

All this talk of being close to the ground takes us back to weeding. Let me invite you to consider weeding to be not only a cleaning up task for Lent, but also to be a good way in which to enter the glory and mystery of the Easter season. Sir Isaac Newton, something like the patron saint of science and the Enlightenment in England, reportedly said that if he had seen farther than others, it was because he stood on the shoulders of giants. Perhaps we will never see farther and more clearly than when we, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, are ourselves humbly on our knees. And while we are there, let us also give thanks that even we may have good work to do to help the life of God flourish in ourselves and in God’s world.

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