

“Spiritual Fruit”

Luke 9:57-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Anita Evans

Several years ago I bought a house and so, partly out of necessity and partly because of my own personal interest, I have become a gardener. Over the years, not only have I learned quite a bit about gardening, but I have also learned lessons about life and have gained a deeper appreciation for the scriptures. The scriptures are filled with agricultural analogies and parables about life. For example, we have Jesus' parables of the seed and the sower, the wheat and the tares, and in today's reading from Galatians, Paul talks about the Fruit of the Spirit. There is something very rewarding about gardening – watching things grow and bear fruit – whether that fruit is a fragrant flower, a vegetable or a literal fruit. I know there is a scientific explanation behind it, but I still find it quite miraculous to plant a small seed in the ground and then have it sprout and grow and then produce either a beautiful flower or something I can enjoy for my supper. It is an example of God's miraculous creation!

But, there is also a cost to gardening. There is the financial cost of the seed and soil and compost. But even more so, there is the work involved. Every spring I have to weed and dig up my vegetable garden before I can plant this year's crop. It's hard work, and inevitably I reach the point where I start to think, “Why am I doing this? Why don't I just buy vegetables like other people?” But before long, I begin to see the result of my hard work, clearing the ground, and I begin to enjoy the hard physical work. I think of the hope and joy inherent in planting the seeds that will become vegetables. So, I persevere and the hard work becomes something truly enjoyable and rewarding. Similarly, there is a cost to following Jesus. In today's gospel reading from Luke, three different people approach Jesus, seeking to follow him. And to each, he offers a very honest and blunt challenge or warning. To the first person, Jesus says, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” The second person wants to follow Jesus but wants first to bury his father. To him, Jesus replies, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” And the third person who wants to follow Jesus just wants to go back and say farewell to her family. But Jesus tells her, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” There is a cost to following Jesus. Elsewhere, Jesus told the crowd that followed him, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:34-35)

Jim Elliot was a missionary. In 1952, he and some friends went to Ecuador to witness to the Auca people there. Things went smoothly at first but in 1956 he and his four coworkers were all killed by the very people they were trying to help. He left behind his wife, Elizabeth, and 10 month old daughter. After Jim's death, his wife Elizabeth was overcome with fear, but she decided to face her fears, and with some other missionaries carried on his work. Elizabeth later wrote two books about Jim Elliot; he has had schools named after him, and documentaries and films telling his story have been produced. His work was not forgotten and eventually bore fruit.

Sometimes God calls us to leave our homes and loved ones and go somewhere far away. We may be called to travel and not have a permanent home again. Loved ones may pass away and we are not there to say goodbye. Like Jim Elliot, we may be called somewhere dangerous. Sometimes God calls us to do things closer to home, but perhaps just as scary to us, such as leading a Bible Study, providing visits to people who are alone, or helping at one of the shelters or community meals in town. We all have a calling and often it has a cost involved – putting in time and effort – stepping out of our comfort zone. But Jesus also promises a reward, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive one hundredfold now in this age and in the age to come, eternal life.” (Mark 10:29-30) So there is a cost to gardening and to following Jesus.

Another aspect of gardening with an equivalent in the spiritual life is weeds. Every gardener knows that the battle against weeds is a constant one. Now, there is some debate about what constitutes a weed. One definition states that any plant that grows where you do not want it is a weed; so grass in your lawn is **not** a weed but grass in your vegetable plot **is** a weed. But there are some plants that are generally **always** considered weeds. One of the problems with weeds is that they are invasive. They grow quickly and aggressively, taking over an area, crowding out more advantageous or desirable plants. Plants need two things – water and nutrients. Water is provided by rain and from moisture from the soil. Nutrients come from the soil and from photosynthesis of sunlight. Weeds compete with other plants for water and nutrients, and because of their invasive, aggressive nature they often have an advantage over other plants – crowding them out so that they either don’t thrive or perhaps even get choked out completely and die. Some weeds harbour diseases which are not harmless to themselves but which will infect other plants around them, weakening and eventually killing them. And there are weeds in our spiritual life as well. Jesus told a parable about a sower of seed and four different environments in which it fell. (Matthew 13) In grace, the seed or good news is offered to all but its reception and growth is governed by the soil it lands on or the person receiving it. Some seed is sown on the hard path and never takes root at all. Other seed is sown on shallow soil and takes root, but because it doesn’t have deep roots, it shrivels and dies. Some seed is sown among thorns – or weeds – and though it takes root and grows – it is choked out and doesn’t bear fruit. And some seed is sown on good soil, takes root, is able to develop deep roots, grow and thrive and bear fruit. Now, I would love for all of us to be the good soil, but the truth is that we live in a fallen world, and this side of heaven, we all have thorns or weeds in our lives. And sadly, to the degree that we have thorns or weeds in our lives, our ability to bear fruit is limited. In today’s reading from Galatians, Paul mentions several things that can be considered weeds: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.” (Galatians 5:19-21) “And things like these” – this list is not exhaustive – there are any number of weeds and thorns that can choke out the work of the Spirit in our life.

Now, as a gardener I’ve learned that there are basically two methods of getting rid of weeds. First – pull them out. And not just the surface or superficial part of the weeds, but as much of the root as possible. Some plants have very deep roots; some have roots which spread out in a wide far-reaching network. But as we pull out the weeds and their roots, two things happen to any remaining fragment of the roots. First, we weaken them and then, because they are

weak, they are more susceptible to disease and less likely to survive drought or the cold of winter or any other harsh conditions. Over time the weeds become weaker and weaker and eventually die off. Second – after the weeds and their roots have been pulled out, it is best to plant something else in that spot. As the new plant grows and thrives, becoming strong and healthy, the weakened root of the weed will find it harder and harder to grow and compete for water and nutrients. In the spiritual life, this happens in our minds and hearts. Jesus said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come.” (Mark 7:20-21) If we want to get rid of thorns and weeds, we need to change our heart and mind. We can do this by getting rid of the negative things we fill them with – pulling out the weeds – and filling them with good thoughts and feelings – planting good seed. This may mean changing what we read, what kind of music we listen to, what we watch on television, who we spend time with – anything that affects how we think and feel. And most importantly, we can pray and ask God, through his Holy Spirit to help us in our efforts. Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. I am the vine, you are the branches.” (John 15: 1-2, 5) Jesus has promised that God the Father will help us get rid of weeds in our life so that we can bear more fruit.

Perhaps the best part of gardening is enjoying the fruits of one’s labours. I have a particular love of flowers – the bright colours and fragrance they bring – I really miss these in the winter. I also really enjoy growing my own vegetables. Even though it takes some work it is very rewarding to grow your own food. And one of the things I love most about gardening is the part that I don’t even do. As I mentioned at the beginning, there is something miraculous about planting a seed and watching a plant grow. The truth is, we plant and water and weed, but the growth comes from God. While we go about our day to day lives, the seed we plant is bursting forth and reaching towards the sun, growing day by day until it produces what it was created for – whether a flower or a vegetable or a fruit.

And so it is with our spiritual life. In today’s reading from Galatians, Paul lists the fruit of the spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity (or in some translations goodness), faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) These are all personal traits that are very hard for us to develop on our own, but as we get rid of the weeds in our lives and allow the Spirit to work in our lives, they grow and develop on their own. For example, we are called to love our neighbours, including our enemies. It is very hard, I would say impossible without God’s help, to love some people. We all know people who we find difficult to love or even unlovable. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, “I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may comprehend what are the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:16-19) As we grow in the Spirit, Christ dwells in our hearts and we come to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge – we become rooted and grounded in His love – a love that overflows to others. We start to see people the way God sees them and we can’t help but love them.

So it is with joy as well. At the end of his teaching on being the true vine, Jesus said, "I have said these things to you so that **my** joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11) Jesus' joy will be in us and our joy will be complete. The joy we experience as a Christian is deeply rooted and able to withstand any thorns and weeds. It allows us to rejoice always – in any and every situation. Jesus also promises us peace. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27) This is what the apostle Paul called "the peace which surpasses understanding." (Philippians 4:7) A supernatural peace that though we can experience it, it is beyond human understanding. A peace that lasts throughout any difficult situation we may face.

I came across an analogy recently. "Trying to grasp the love of God is like attempting to put the Pacific Ocean in a bucket." Suppose you go down to the Pacific seaside and fill a bucket with water. If I ask you what is in the bucket, you would reply, "the Pacific Ocean." You would be right – but also very wrong. What you would have in your bucket would be an infinitesimal fraction of the ocean. By the same token, what we have experienced, and certainly what we can describe in human terms, is but a minute fraction of God's love. But, we can experience part of the Pacific Ocean – we can even swim in it – surrounding ourselves with it. And, so it is with God's love, we can experience it even though it surpasses knowledge. God's love is huge and when we feel that love, we experience joy and peace that surpasses understanding and circumstances. And so it is with the rest of the Fruit of the Spirit; as we grow in spiritual faith and maturity, they manifest themselves in our lives in ways that we cannot imagine or comprehend. Just like the seed that we plant and water and weed, and then stand back and let grow.

Let us pray:

Spirit of the living God, come fill us, that we may live in joy and peace, and that our lives may show forth the fruit of patience, kindness and generosity; that we may live in faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control through your power working within us. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and you, blessed Spirit, now and forever. Amen.