

## Getting to the Root of the Matter

I am going to tell you a story about a flower bed and then parallel it to life's circumstances. The flower bed originally was on the grounds of a local Catholic church. I am sure during the years in which the church owned and maintained the bed, it was beautiful. There was some type of statue in the middle of it on a concrete pedestal. The bed itself is round, approximately ten feet in diameter. It is



formed with a concrete curb and surrounded by sidewalks. At the time that I became the steward of the bed, it had been managed off and on by volunteers, but no one had really taken care of it for at least five years, perhaps even longer. It had perennial hostas, lilies and at least one daffodil in it. Originally it had black landscape cloth laid down and mulch over that. I noticed there was a bit of a problem with a perennial creeping grass in the bed when I first took it over. I pulled up as much as I could of that. I dug up some perennials from another bed – lavender and irises – and added them to the bed. I found some more mulch and mulched it. It looked pretty good.

My weeding had been very thorough for about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the bed, but time got away from me, and I couldn't get to the last quarter. I assigned another volunteer to work on it and keep it maintained the rest of the summer, but she also found it too hard to finish that section.

It looked OK, but not great that summer. The next spring, I added more herbs and found another volunteer to work on it. As had happened the year before, it was easy enough in the spring, but as the summer wore on, the weeds got bigger and harder to manage and the bed got away from us.

Another year came, and another volunteer agreed to take on the bed in the spring. She weeded, mulched and tried to keep the weeds down, but by fall of that year this is what the bed looked like:



It was really impossible to try to weed out the bed in any conventional way by this point. It was clear the biggest problem was the grass I had originally encountered. It had gradually taken over the entire bed, even choking out strong perennials.

A friend had asked me to come up with a work program for her special ed. class from the local high school, and I decided that this flower bed would be the perfect project. It had to be completely dug out to get it back into shape. The kids loved

digging. We started with tarps and pots and they threw weeds in the one tarp, salvageable plants on another. We potted hostas and offered them for free to any who wanted them.



It took several weeks to dig out the plants. One Saturday I went out there by myself and spent a total of eight hours digging out just the roots of the grass. I discovered that the grass roots were a foot down and had completely filled the circle, intertwined in the concrete all around the outside.



This picture is at the base of the pedestal in the center and is at least a foot deep. I dug and pulled out these roots and filled three large tarp loads with just the roots. We had already removed the top vegetation before I started this process. From the top, before I started digging and pulling roots for eight hours, it looked pretty clean. To an outside observer who had not seen what this bed looked like before we started, it was ready for replanting. But, if I had not taken the time to dig out all those roots, we would have been right back where we were every year, because the grass would once again take over the bed because we had only pulled out the tops, not the roots.

After all that work, and trust me it was a LOT of work, the students came back and helped me smooth out the surface with rakes and replant some of our salvaged plants and some others we had salvaged from one of the garden beds. We also added some spring bulbs and mulched the whole thing. We had replaced the pots in the center with a refurbished planter made from old beehive boxes.



I told the students it was like buried treasure that we will find in the spring when this bed comes to life once again. We will have lovely blooms and it will be useful as well, with herbs to enjoy. Yes, we will still need to weed it and maintain it, and make sure the grass doesn't take over again, but it will be much easier now that we destroyed the roots that were so entrenched in the depths of this bed.

This bed will look different than it did before in its heyday. But, that difference is not bad. We changed the types of plants to better suit the purpose of the bed and also its location. The hostas are best suited to shady spots and this is a full sun area. Also, since now it is part of the community garden rather than a church yard, we have emphasized edible plants in the bed, including herbs and strawberries.

Now, let me make my parallel to life. So much of our lives are spent trying to pull the weeds of our lives to make us look respectable on the outside to other

people. We think if we just try harder and have more self-control, we can overcome that besetting sin or bad habit in our lives. But no matter how hard we try, we keep pulling and mulching and trying to cover up these annoying problems, they seem to not only come back, but stronger and more difficult to deal with each time.

Maybe our issues have something deep rooted that is their cause. Maybe the deep roots are not difficult to identify, but we have made such a habit of ignoring them, that they have entwined themselves into every part of our inner being. For instance, maybe we have some behavior that we indulge in that we don't like because deep down we are afraid of something. Maybe we have a deep issue with pride we don't want to let go of. Maybe we think we have to carry the whole world on our own shoulders and the success or failure of our lives is completely our responsibility. That is a big load to carry. Maybe we are insecure because someone we love and respect has made us feel inadequate and we work too hard to prove otherwise. These are common roots, but there are others as well.

The only way to identify what roots are causing these things in our life is to do as King David did and pray to God and ask him to reveal them to us. David prayed, "Search me and know me, O God, and reveal to me if there be any wicked way in me." In the book of James, we are told that if we lack wisdom, we can ask God, and He will lead us. The Holy Spirit indwells believers in Jesus Christ. He alone can show us the depths of our hearts. We need to yield ourselves to our heavenly Gardener and allow Him to gently dig deeply into the depths of our hearts and pull out those roots. It is painful to allow God to reveal these things to us. It may take a long time to work through the truth of situations and let Christ take our infirmities upon Himself and bring healing to our souls. It will require us to let God remove the roots of these things, and we may not want to let those things go. All discipline is painful at the moment, but in the end produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

As I discovered in the flower bed, although others were willing, even enthusiastic to help me weed the bed each spring, no one could really do it alone. But even when I got a team of people to help, we could do the rough work that would make it look OK on the outside, but to really do the hard work of digging it all out, that had to be done by the one who had the management of the garden. In the

flowerbed, that meant I had to dig out all those roots with lots of sweat for over eight hours. But in my heart and yours, only the Master Gardener of our souls is able to do that work. You and I cannot do it ourselves. It is not in us to save ourselves or to clean up the depths of our hearts. That is the work of God, through His Holy Spirit.

We also cannot do this work in other people's hearts. We cannot even do it in our own, how can we do it in the hearts of others? We can give them direction and lead them to the Rock that is higher than we are. We can help them understand that just pulling weeds and covering up things with mulch makes it look better temporarily but doesn't solve the problem. In fact, adding mulch year by year adds to the fertility of the soil. It helps the plants, but since the weeds were more deeply embedded, it helped them more. The soil in that flower bed was so rich and dark and fertile, it was amazing. Pulling off the tops of the weeds without pulling the roots also just encouraged more vigorous growth. So all our "good works" of weeding and mulching, in the end just made the weeds stronger and more likely to take over the bed. This is also true in our lives. If we think we can make ourselves better people by our own good works, we will only make ourselves more miserable and more deeply entrenched in our besetting sins. If we could make ourselves good, we would never have needed Jesus to come at all. This is a sad deception and lie of the enemy of our souls.

The process of allowing the Master Gardener dig down into your heart and remove the roots of things that are causing you pain and hindering you from having a full and productive life can be very painful. Some things may have to be removed entirely, like we removed the hosta plants. They weren't appropriate for the setting. There was nothing wrong with hostas, they weren't poisonous or a noxious weed, they just weren't right for that location. In the same way, we need to be willing to let go of things in our lives that are not necessarily bad, but are taking up time, energy and space that would be better used in something that would make our lives more useful and productive. Some of the plants were taken out, then put back in, but in different positions. Maybe our priorities are not aligned in the best way for us. God, in His wisdom, can re-order our priorities to make our lives fuller, more beautiful, and more useful and productive. Sometimes we are not letting go of something that is actually not productive at all in our lives. We had to pull out dead or almost dead plants that were not going to be of

any use in the bed. At one time those plants were useful and productive, but their time was up, and it was time to allow the space they occupied to be filled with other things. Some plants had overgrown themselves and needed to be split apart to make more plants. We distributed these into other beds around the property, so the plants could be more vigorous and fill more locations. The process of breaking apart plants can seem violent, but in the end, it produces more vigorous and lively plants and more of them.

The other lesson I learned and tried to teach to the students was that the work that was done under the soil will not be evident for some time. It will lie dormant, even under snow for the winter. Even in the spring, things will slowly come to life. Some bulbs will bloom very early, others mid-season, others not until summer is fully upon us. The small plants we put in to replace the old, larger ones will take time to grow and fill the bed. But, by removing the old roots of the grass, adding new mulch, and repositioning the plants, we gave them the best chance to flourish and to get ahead of the weeds. It will be easier for the gardener to manage the weeds because we dug so deep and did so much work. With a little light work on a regular basis, we should be able to keep the bed looking lovely and it will also be productive.

When hard things happen in our lives, maybe it is the Master Gardener doing a major work to dig out and overhaul our heart. It may seem painful, unfair, and very difficult. Yet, maybe it will yield a peaceful fruit of righteousness and joy if we only yield to the Master's hand and trust that His ways are best. In time, after a bleak period of dormancy, even under cold and snow, little signs of new life and beauty will appear. As the weather warms and the sun grows brighter, more life and growth and beauty appear. In time, a beautiful bed will yield useful fruit and will be a blessing both to the bed itself and all who see and use it. God's ways are not our ways. His timing is not what we may think. Our part is to simply trust Him, that He has our good in mind and He loves us and wants what is best for us, whether we realize what that is or not.

I for one want to be the most beautiful and productive and joyful person I can be. I want to yield every part of my life to the Master Gardener. He will take the worries and cares of what needs done when in my garden and will gently lead me where I need to go. He is completely trustworthy and knows me completely, so



His ways and His leading will never fail. I need to trust in the Lord with all my heart and lean not on my own understanding. In all my ways I need to acknowledge Him, and He will make my path straight. He does the hard work; I just follow and trust Him. In this is the secret of the fullness of joy, which I certainly want for my own life.