

My momma loves gardening, and she's good at it, sorta. Everybody says she has a green thumb, which embarrasses her because she knows full well how many things she's tried her hand at and killed. She doesn't have a green thumb so much as a tiny experiment in suburban darwinism. If it can survive her, she'll love it. Back in the day, she and I built a compost pile, and you better believe we put that thing to good use. Black dirt poured out the bottom. We never even had to stir it. That chore was happily taken on by the family rottweiler. If we couldn't find her, without fail, she'd be digging or lazing among the kitchen scraps like a pig in fertilizer. Once in a while, even with the 100 pounds of dog on top of it, once in a while, something sprouted in that compost pile, and mom treasured it. She'd gently follow the roots through the loose compost, ease it out, and replant it with a healthy scoop of that rich compost to give it a boost along the way.

Mom had a soft spot for these little sprouts. I think it had something to do with the hard life she'd lived. She sprouted up, got discarded, found a new place to set down roots. She persisted in spite of it all. Maybe she offered the gentle care to these little volunteer sprouts that she wished she'd had. Funny thing is, sometimes what she'd plant came from our kitchen scraps. We ended up with all sorts of watermelon, squash, and even tomatoes thanks to that compost pile. But not everything came from scraps. Nature was there, too, so we also ended up with a single blade of grass, a vine of greenbrier, and an especially ill-informed patch of poison ivy.

And all that came with a conundrum: to weed or not to weed. Once mom decided to weed, she'd do it with a ferocity that made her targets shake in their roots. But sometimes it took her a minute to decide to. It all depended on her mood and how generous she felt about the world that day. See, she knew all too well what it felt like to get discarded, and she knew what it meant to get pulled up by your roots. More than most, she knew what it felt like not to meet the world's standards, or at least, one person's standards. I remember one time we talked about how pretty wildflowers are, and she lamented how many wildflowers are considered weeds. I think we must've been looking at a full grown thistle, 'cause thistle's highly regulated in Arkansas. I'm no lawyer, but I grew up being told they were illegal because they poison cattle. Anyway, she couldn't stand that. Mom understood the danger to critters, and she didn't particularly love the battle that came with trying to grab hold of a thistle and pull it out. But she loved the dangerous beauty of its blossoms. She said something really profound in that moment, and it's stuck with me all these years later. She said, "Weeds are just flowers without a pedigree."

Now, as any of you gardeners out there know, that's a beautiful sentiment until it comes time to tend your garden. You need ruthless vision to clear out your crop's competitors. Some of this is a "beauty in the eye of the beholder" situation. But it's not just that. Jesus is out here talking about poorly planted seeds dying off, or weeds sneaking in (by themselves or some other hand) along with the difficulty that comes for crops to grow at all. Look, it's hard enough for plants to do their thing, hard enough that some need our attention and care. There's a million reasons for a crop to fail. And it's up to us to anticipate those million reasons and respond. Whether you think it's chaos or the devil or the predictable difficulties of trying to bend nature to your will, there's always work to do in the garden. And some of that requires determining what you want in there and what you don't. Sometimes that's an easy choice, and sometimes you're not entirely sure what you're looking at. But at some point, you've got to decide.

Jesus has some pretty harsh things to say here. Ask me a few years ago, and I probably would've balked at the idea. Weeds are just flowers without a pedigree, after all. Some, sure, but some weeds need pulling. But there are far too many that've been weeded out of our Christian gardens because of who or what they are. Churches continue to be some of the most segregated spaces, some of the least safe spaces for LGBTQ+ folks,

dangerous places for people that disagree on a point of doctrine or that bring imagined shame on the institution. As much time as I've spent in churches, I know these too well. And I know how quick some church folk can be to point the finger (and here I am pointing it right back). My knee-jerk's to do just exactly the same thing but to them instead.

I'd love for this place to fill up with other churches' weeds. Give me a million thistle, a thousand without pedigree, a dozen wounded by the overzealously puritanical. That sounds like just exactly the kind of garden I want to tend. But nothing's quite so simple in Christ. It's not my job to decide who's the weed and who's not. It is my job, our job, to make sure whatever seeds fall here get what they need. It's on God to sort out what needs weeding. And I think there's a big temptation, one I certainly fall into, to hear this parable and assume it's about plucking out and casting off individual people. I think it's broader than that. None of us are weeds, pedigree or not, not a single one irredeemable. But we do all have something about us that needs weeding. Maybe each of us is that garden growing crops and weeds both. Maybe we need some tending in our souls. Some of us are gonna need more than others, some are gonna need different kinds of tending, but we each need something tended to. There's a whole lotta healing and renewing, comfort and rest, even sustenance that every single one of us needs. And very, very few of us get that kind of attention.

I wonder what we'd look like, I wonder what each of us could become if we spent as much time tending to the gardens of our souls as we do tending to everything else that comes our way. If we looked with discerning eyes at what's growing inside. If we saw the beauty of a thistle and the bane of a burdock. If we cultivated even the soil itself. Paul says Creation groans in labor pains. Perhaps Creation groans in each of us too, longing to bring something new and beautiful and unique into the world. Perhaps along with Creation our souls groan.

I know this is a little weird to think about, but I wonder if this place can be sort of like that compost pile mom and I put together. I wonder if this is where we come to lay what we cast aside. Where we cultivate the conditions for growth. Where we make space for you to leave what you've weeded out at the altar. In time, what we lay here becomes a rich bed to feed us, to encourage even more growth in each of us alone and all of us together. And maybe, once in a while, a tiny shoot'll pop up on its own. We know this already, but it bears reminding. Creation will groan. Our souls will groan. There will be death, there will be decay, there will be weeding and hopefully careful tending, but God willing, there will also be new life.