

Stubborn Flowers with the Wisdom to Survive

A Homily for Flower Communion

Beacon UU Congregation

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Every morning in the summer of 1997, I sauntered from the Charles St. subway stop at the foot of Beacon Hill to Massachusetts General Hospital for my chaplaincy training. It was not an especially scenic walk nor finely landscaped, save for a row of young trees set down in compact soil circles nestled in grooved cement squares. So, you can imagine my curiosity one morning when I spied a sturdy green plant jutting from a sliver of dirt struggling for air between the sidewalk and an imposing stone building facade.

"What is that?" I wondered as I swerved off course for a closer inspection. The plant was approx. three feet tall with multiple silvery green soft stems similar to the prized plant, "Lamb's Ear." Perched atop all but one stem was an unopened compact bud; the remaining stem sported an actual blossom -- cornflower blue, squared-off petals, the size of a coat button, not unlike an aster. My gardener's eye tried to identify it. "It's nothing," I eventually surmised, "just a weed."

The next day the lowly impostor caught my eye from nearly a block away. It had bloomed overnight and wore a veritable bonnet of blossoms. My respect for the plant grew as I stopped to admire it. "You're a stubborn flower, aren't you?" I muttered under my breath. "A stubborn and beautiful flower. I thought of my patients waiting at the hospital and murmured: "You're A survivor. You're amazing."

Weeds. We have been conditioned, dare I say, brainwashed, to appreciate and cultivate only the well-bred members of the botanical family -- the fine roses, the graceful lilies, the amusing black-eyed Susans, the elegant peonies. Weeds such as the kudzu, the clover, the ubiquitous dandelion...well, as Hugh Johnson sneers in his book, *The Principles of Gardening*, they are "plants in the wrong place " landscape spoilers.

How peculiar, really, given that "no matter how glorious the flowers may be, they soon shrivel and wilt." Surely, weeds aren't perfect, either...left unchecked they do, in Johnson's words, "starve, overshadow or throttle the better things we are trying to grow." But can't we spare even a little respect for the lowly weed, especially since (like my cornflower blue buddy) it is often *indistinguishable* from the more exalted wildflower?

There is a metaphor here for our emotional and spiritual lives. Think of how our culture instructs us to tend the inner garden....cultivate the positive, the presentable, the non-threatening; weed out the fear, the grief, the anger, or the despair. We are taught, "Do not let the weeds of doubt or sadness or vulnerability "blur the outline or hide the desired effect." How especially difficult it is to keep up this charade under our current coronavirus circumstances, isn't it?

I submit that the scraggly, work-a-day weed is as much a part of our inherent and blessed emotional and spiritual landscape as the eye-popping zinnia and the delicate hot-house orchid.

As I see it, if we go about yanking out our weedier feelings by the handful before we've even given them a glance or tried to appreciate their quirky beauty, we'll be left with what Johnson calls "meek little things that we need to coddle on a cold frame." No, we do not want weeds of negativity to "starve, overshadow or throttle" anything – not our faith, our relationships, our vision, or our health. However, one might say that weeds themselves, with their "unfair vigor and tenacity" are veritable ambassadors of hopefulness.

As Hugh Johnson writes with unabashed respect, "weeds hang on to their place in the garden when any well-bred plant would give up!" And here we find another metaphor for the tenacious, the resolute, the committed folks planted in our congregation – those who tangle around us like Virginia creeper on a picket fence – the lovers and dreamers who have refused to be weeded out or cultivated.

You are all stubborn and beautiful and wise flowers with the wisdom to survive, to endure, and are not "flowers in the wrong place; you are amazing. Woven, too, into the trellis of this community are the survivors of cancer and other maladies and misfortunes and mistreatments, people coping with some of life's toughest challenges, those with mental illness and their families, those within marginalized groups who are under even greater duress in our embattled and beleaguered society – you have refused to be weeded out or cultivated – you are stubborn and beautiful and wise flowers – you are amazing.

You've hung on in the garden and we've hung on there with you, and we will dance with you amidst the kudzu and the columbine. The world needs stubborn flowers who hold their ground (pun intended), so I hope we will all bloom where we are planted (no matter the soil) and grow hopefully towards the sun in your own unique and weedy way. And that we will help others with less rich soil to do the same.

For inspiration –consider a tie-dye clad child with the bright blue band-aids on her knees from a colleague's reflection [by Rev. Victoria Safford] in which she writes: "There are children all over this world, and some adults scattered here and there, who unfailingly will punctuate their lives and their days with sacred celebration and with rituals signifying joy, no matter what they have – or don't – to work with, no matter what the fury the world outside is howling. They will savor life and breath and all their days no matter what is dealt them. It's the only way some people know how to live – with gladness and cacophonous color, while chanting: "This is the life I'd risk anything to save."

Hearing these words, I'm reminded of that day back in 1997 when I spotted that glorious, triumphant, sassy weed in the pavement on Beacon Hill. Throughout that day as a chaplain intern, I encountered dozens of predictable bouquets in the rooms of my patients, and I smiled to myself thinking about my stubborn flower with the wisdom to survive, down on the street.

I imagined bringing a loved one a brazen bohemian bouquet of hardy, vigorous, well-adjusted weeds. "Here," I would chirp, "I picked these for you. They're weeds, but they're not all that bad looking. In fact, check out this silvery-green one with the cornflower blue blossoms." "Maybe you are feeling like a weed today, here in this hospital bed. So, may they will inspire you. May they will give you strength.

May they will reassure you that although your weedier emotions seem undesirable compared to a bouquet of cheerfulness, you are not a "plant in the wrong place. May they encourage you to live with gladness and cacophonous color, to send your seeds in to the world in wondrous ways, shoot out of tight, dry pods like confetti. To find a way to grow by the side of a windy road or at the top of a spine of stone. To find a way to love and be loved, to sing with bees and birds, exhaling breath as sweet as sleep. May you bud, even in a weedy way, for budding is a beginning to blooming.

As the poet Galway Kinnell reminds us:

"The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers, from within, of self blessing; though sometimes it is necessary to reattach a thing its loveliness."

May the day come, for you, each of us, when the risk to remain tight in a compact bud is more painful than the risk it takes to boldly blossom, even if what blooms is a wild and wondrous, wending and stubborn, work-a-day weed.

Blessed be, blessed we, and Amen.

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