

Knowing Well the Garden We Tend

Galatians 6:1-10

Of all the springtime changes that came to the Hayes household this year, one of them was the inspiration to actually tend to the gardens surrounding the parsonage. If you haven't noticed, then obviously we have more work to do.

If you have, you may have wondered what we did to the mammoth and ratty looking rhododendron along the north side of the house, which must have been planted by the Pratts in their early years and left to mushroom through decades of neglect into something rivaling the great Sequoias. Or you might have been pleased that we finally took our weed bed out back and created a modest perennial garden, as well as an equally modest lupine patch along the front toward the church side.

This entire beautification project was a natural consequence of our sudden and prolonged mania one Saturday morning in early June, ripping up bamboo shoots and tearing away wild grapevines and parasitic Morning Glory tendrils that had invaded our landscape and choked off all forms of life, including two of our former cats. Looking off the deck one morning, we rightfully judged that the Groton landfill had a more appealing presentation than did our gardens. I thought to myself, "How can I possibly leave it this way with the Jim and Nancy Pratt returning this fall and moving in right across the street? I'll either be the cause of their sudden and early demise, or else we'll find them every morning out in our side yard, tending to that which we obviously hadn't!"

So with our reputations and pride on the line, I knew it was time for action. We went right to work and began to clear out anything and everything that was already dead or didn't seem like it was intended to be

grown in such quantity or was, in fact, a foreign interloper from the netherworld of Front Street! After three truckloads (thank you, Doug Mansfield!) of both flora and not-so-flora torn up from this degenerate parcel of church property, we succeeded in recreating “a once was lost but now is found” terraced garden space to add to the appeal of our lovely church property. As a result, in one short month Paul and Wendy Hayes arose from the slums of Cathedral Heights.

Now, to be honest, this transformation of the garden occurred without surgical precision. I’m pretty sure Jim and Nancy would have been horrified to see me at work, ripping out of the ground anything that even remotely seemed “weedy,” even though my interpretation of “weedy and worthless” was fairly liberal and ignorant of most botanical species. For all I know, there may have been priceless, one-of-a-kind, floricultural treasures hidden in that jungle that were judiciously placed at one time in the terra firma surrounding the parsonage—marvelous botanical specimens that were generously donated, perhaps, from the more upscale landscapes of that horticultural heaven known as Groton Long Point. But since I didn’t plant any of this and had no idea of what was there, if they didn’t come out of the ground with the word “keep” printed on their leaves, then they were subject to my rather capricious judgment as to their ultimate value. Certainly, I recognize some lucky dump picker may have discovered an English garden’s worth of quality stock when the Hayeses undertook their Darwinian downsizing. But that’s the price you pay for enthusiastic ignorance.

Well, there must have been something in the June air this year, because I’m not the only one suffering from “enthusiastic ignorance” in an English garden! That seemed to be what occurred late in the month in

Great Britain, when they ripped themselves right out of the European Union. That was not only unexpected, many never saw that coming. And for good reason since, in the days following the referendum, we're told the number one search on Google in the UK was "What's the E.U.?"

Apparently, there is now a "buyer's regret" going on, as thousands protested in London yesterday and millions have signed an online petition seeking another vote on the matter. "Enthusiastic ignorance," as our British friends are discovering, can be very costly indeed.

To be fair, it's not like we don't see the same thing occurring in our own country. Here we are weeks away from the party conventions, and it appears as if the American electorate is prepared for their own buyer's regret in this election cycle. I'll spare you my analysis, but it's fair to say no one could have imagined in 2015 what we're facing in 2016. For one thing, all elements of conventionality seem to have vanished and the concept of a "well-informed voter" is, in some circles, turning out to be a quaint anachronism from a by-gone era. Accurate information and sound reasoning are being cast aside in favor of popularized perceptions and visceral reactions. As a result, instead of debating the pros and cons of each party's candidate, we're faced with the dilemma of trying to figure out who's the pro and who's the con! "Enthusiastic ignorance" seems to be a common problem everywhere.

As much as we can blame the parties, the media, or the way elections take place nowadays, it still comes down to "we, the people." For whatever reason, we have sown the seeds of all the various -isms and -phobias that are now growing up like weeds and choking off some of the better ideals and character of our country. When we are at our best, ours is a society that fosters a sense of meaningful community—welcoming

immigrants, valuing diversity, rewarding hard work, honoring personal service and sacrifice, respecting differences of belief, creed, religion, culture, and opinion, and collectively wrestling out what we hope will be “the common good” in building up our commonwealth. However, when we are at our worst, we are quite the opposite, aren’t we? To quote Yeats, “things fall apart, the centre cannot hold...the best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity.” That seems to be the character of these times, often without any idea of what we’re doing to our homeland in the process.

So how did we get to this place? In many ways, it’s been a long time coming, much like the weeds that have cropped up and been allowed to grow in my garden for much too long. Neglect has something to do with it. We have neglected to cultivate a strong sense of the common good, with common courtesy and decency, and common civic duty—a trend that’s gotten more worrisome because of the breakdown of our public and private discourse and the fracturing of our common bonds. As much as people might rejoice or despair over cultural changes, one that affects us all is the loss of a social contract that reminds us we’re all in this together (what you do will impact my life and what I do will impact yours), which allows us to cultivate a sense of the common good.

Centuries ago, the philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, postulated that when societies fail to maintain a strong social contract, human beings will revert to a “state of nature,” where society is similar to a collection of atoms, with everyone looking out only for themselves and doing what they want, without regard to anyone else—an extreme form of libertarianism. In the Hobbesian paradigm, this breakdown ultimately results in social disorder, with increasing anarchy and a world characterized largely by fear.

I often wonder if we've reached that state in 2016. On so many fronts, the common social contract that progressively built this country over the past century has not been cultivated effectively enough for people to sense sufficient responsibility toward building a fair and equitable society—at least for people other than their own. Ironically, it's often first generation immigrants pursuing citizenship who have a better handle on this (as they develop a working knowledge of how our system is supposed to operate) than those who are native born to this democracy. Those forgotten moral and civic lessons we used to commonly instill do matter.

For most of us, a strong social contract is the only way we can manage our lives, dependent as we are upon public services, public and private trust, collective economic interests, and a commitment to the common good. When people start behaving like they are ill-informed or lazy in their judgment, they will often vote against their own best interests and of those like them because they allow the scapegoating rhetoric of politics and pundits to manipulate their minds, instead of thinking through the implications of what is best for the common good. Just like Brexit, it's the people who can least afford it who have largely embraced the skewed logic and tribal defensiveness of the atomistic world. In a manner of speaking, they are yanking out what they should want to keep in their garden and tossing it away believing it to be merely a weed! We could well do the same in our own homeland, fragmenting our society and world even more.

Whether or not you agree with my assessment, the strong social contract is still vital to our common good. If we want to turn this around, then the sense of responsibility begins in our own part of the collective garden we share. For one thing, it's good for each of us to take notice of we fill our heads and hearts with throughout the course of the week—who we

listen to or follow, whose opinion we respect (maybe uncritically), or whose complaints we don't bother to check for accuracy or perspective—distinguishing between what is good, inspiring, and motivating us with noble, altruistic aspirations from those things which end up being like nasty weeds working their way into our minds and souls, destroying so much of our social trust and what we value in society.

With that comes a duty (as much as we are able) to stand up to those who speak out in ignorance or with offensive rhetoric, especially that laced with crudeness, prejudice and bigotry. Silence in the face of insensitive distortions and offensive lies becomes a form of complicity with error. To avoid arrogance on our own part, it's essential and fair, as well, to challenge our own thinking—to find a more informed balance to our personal opinions, or at least listen to those who disagree with us in an agreeable manner. No one should simply parrot an inaccurate belief or rumor that's messing with our minds. To return to the analogy of the garden, get to know and tend to your own mental garden and check for weeds and stuff that shouldn't be in there and then fertilize and nurture what is good and beneficial.

I won't take the time to explore in detail the text from Galatians, in part because it arises out of an entirely different context than ours today. But I will note some of the verses, mainly because there are some proverbial phrases that inspired my own thinking, especially as descriptors of serving the common good and returning a bit of civility to our life and society as a whole:

- *Correct someone in a spirit of gentleness;*
- *Bear one another's burdens;*
- *All must test their own work...*

- *All must carry their own loads...*
- *Do not be deceived...*
- *You reap whatever you sow...*
- *If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh...*
- *Do not grow weary in doing what is right...*
- *Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...*

All of this seems like the kind of wisdom that elders would bestow upon younger generations about how to conduct themselves in relationship with others. We need this kind of guidance for our present times, beginning with knowing what's going on inside of us, as we tend our own gardens, in a manner of speaking. We are the contributors to the common good and to common decency. Like a well-informed gardener, discern what is good and identify what needs to go. Know well the garden you tend.

On this July 4th weekend, let me close with some new lyrics to a familiar national song—one that we have already sung this morning. My good friend, Ken Sehested, penned these words, appropriate to these times, following the beloved lyrics of poet, Samuel Smith:

My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride,
From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

We are a people free, joining in liberty our many throngs.
Through much diversity, grant solidarity,
Turning from enmity in joyful song.

Guiding us in the past, God's hand has held us fast, God's pow'r we feel.
May righteousness be claimed, true justice be sustained;
Spirit, with us remain, Christ's love reveal.

My country 'tis of thee, struggling for liberty, of thee I sing.
Land where my people died, brilliant with nature's pride,
From plain and mountain side let freedom ring.

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