It was only three weeks ago that I took out about three bushel baskets worth of stubborn weeds from the church’s front perennial garden, and I removed at least that much from that same spot last week! Where does this stuff come from, and why won’t it stop?! Questions, questions . . . I know all of us tending to gardens and flowers at church and at home deal with this pesky problem throughout the heat of the summer. But anything worth growing to a bountiful conclusion is worth the attention.

The flip side to all of this pulling and tugging, however, is that many clear and meaningful thoughts come to me while I’m struggling to pull out garlic mustard or wrenching an uncooperative, rope-tough basal cluster from the soil. In the dirt, my mind comes clean.

And so it was last week as random thoughts crept back into my mind from our recent road trip to the mountains. Judging from conversations at church, some of you are very familiar with the breath-taking beauty of Glacier National Park’s Going-To-The-Sun Road. Along with nearly a week in Montana, throw in Wyoming’s Yellowstone and the Big Horn Mountains, and Teddy Roosevelt’s North Dakota Badlands, and it was a dream trip for anyone with cowboy tendencies.

But within view of those massive and pristine glacier and snow fields In the Northern Rockies, and its long stream of tourists, another America sits in the valley below, one which the region’s visitors seem in a hurry to pass.

On our return trip, Renee and I stopped at a fast food franchise in Browning, Montana, just minutes outside of the park, and center of commerce for the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Even though it would have been below average by Minnesota standards, the Taco John’s appeared to be one of the more modern structures in town. Haggard-looking stray dogs, sometimes in packs, roamed the dusty, weed-filled streets, barely avoiding RVs, cars and fifth-wheel rigs on their way to the high country. Dilapidated houses and trailers appeared to make up a large section of a ghost town – except these structures housed people, with small children playing on barren, crushed-rock front yards. One house was clearly missing a portion of its roof, even while cars (one with all of its wheels still intact) were parked in front, as a very thin, shirtless boy aimlessly bounced a ball off of the door in the midday heat.

Renee and I said very few words about it, and we both felt uneasy, and powerless at that moment. The whole community looked like a Third World country. Isn’t there something we should be doing? How can we, as Christians, just grab a bite and get back in our air-conditioned rides and re-join the happy parade that continues to pass by this struggling place? Compared to Browning, the buffalo herd, grizzlies and bighorn sheep back in the park seemed like the lucky ones. But haven’t we been down this road before? Throw money at it, fix it for today, make a bigger mess for tomorrow. Are bleak conditions here and elsewhere due to a shortage of good people? And will those good people have to do more, much more, to make a dent in easing the burden of poverty? Hard as we try, we all fall short of living up to the teachings of Jesus. And as much good as we try to bring to those around us, places like Browning remind me of how far we still have to go. Maybe we all need to be more like missionaries.

As Pastor Durk said just this Sunday, maybe the church needs to spend less time waiting for people to show up at church, and more time going to the people.