

Notes From the Wayside June 2024



*Wayside Shrine in Carinthia, Austria*

The Ludwig family garden will not be appearing on the cover of Sunset magazine anytime soon. My husband and I, both natives of asphalt-laden urban areas, did not seem to inherit the gene that enables one to create a neat, polished, and orderly garden. Instead, our front yard is a mix of sprawling, unpruned rose bushes, random patches of wildflowers such as daisies, yarrow, and wild flax that have been dug up during our adventures and transplanted, and, inevitably, plenty of weeds, which have resolutely staked out their territory and refused to go anywhere.

Though I understand it is not everyone's cup of tea, I love the messy, unkempt look of our garden, with its rambling, untidy flowers and overgrown shrubs that create good nooky places for children to hide and play. Even the weeds that have moved in uninvited—dandelions, slender speedwell, bird vetch—add a lovely wildness that appeals to my eyes and spirit.

Recently I was walking through the park with my neighbor, Kate, and our children, when she bent down and picked a few leaves of a pervasive local weed called Ribwort Plantain. It is a weed that even I do not like, with odd, goofy flowers resembling some sort of alien spaceship. But Kate told me that when she was a girl growing up in Moldova, people used the leaves of this weed to soothe cuts and scrapes; she said that even children, when they got hurt on the playground, would crush a few Ribwort Plantain leaves and apply them to the wound, just as their mothers had shown them. I researched this and, yes, though Ribwort Plantain is not so nice to look at, it *has* been used for centuries as a folk remedy for a wide variety of ailments.

This got me thinking more deeply about weeds, and how, really, “weeds” don't inherently exist; we *create* them. The notion of what makes any given plant a “weed” is entirely subjective, reflecting a value judgment that we make about that plant's desirability or usefulness. Dandelions, for example, growing in the middle of an otherwise immaculate lawn may infuriate a homeowner, while at the same time being of highest value to a bumblebee or a little girl making a bouquet; it is only a matter of perception that classifies the flower as a troublesome weed or a delightful prize. Indeed, the Britannica Dictionary defines a weed as a “general term for any plant growing where it is not wanted”. In other words, it is whether a plant is *wanted or unwanted* that determines its status as a cultivated plant or a weed.

It strikes me that we often regard unwanted groups of people as if they were weeds. The homeless, the drug addicted, the mentally ill, refugees and immigrants, are all considered blights within our communities; they are the “weeds” that grow where they are not wanted, soiling our beautiful, pristine gardens. Just like weeds, these people are treated as problems that need to be removed.

And yet, Jesus loved the “weeds”, actively *wanted* the *unwanted*. Jesus intentionally sought out and embraced those who were rejected and unwelcome in polite society, and the people of power and prestige of that time (those who might be considered the “prize-winning roses” of the garden, to resume our metaphor) were absolutely baffled by it:

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this,

they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:10-13.)

If Jesus was around today, in 2024, he would undoubtedly be hanging out on the street corners of ghettos, sitting among the tents of a homeless encampment, or making friends in the halls of a psych ward; and all of us “good” Christians, like the Pharisees, would be completely bewildered by it.

Although we may judge a plant, or a person, to be a worthless and disposable “weed”, God does not do this with His creation; He welcomes all to come to Him, the roses and the dandelions. And I find myself imagining that if Jesus were to plant his own garden—a garden of human beings, of his brothers and sisters—perhaps it would not look rather unlike the straggly, wild, and weedy garden adorning the front yard of the Ludwig family home.