

The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

June 15, 2008

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

Psalms 116: 1, 10-17

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I attended Nashotah House, the Episcopal seminary in southern Wisconsin. The seminary is in a mixed area of very expensive resort property and summer homes on an abundance of very beautiful lakes and farm land, principally in corn. The soil in that area is deep, rich, and black, perfect for farming and for gardens.

Happy and I lived in an old building, built in the 1860s, called The Fort. It was so called because the seminary dean had been the first to live there; when he died, his widow refused to vacate the building. There was a genteel stand-off until the seminary built a second such building a few hundred yards away (just a bit of history).

Next to The Fort was a large field, most of which was leased to a local farmer. The remainder was available to us seminarians to plant gardens, and many of us did so.

As I was saying, the soil and the temperature and the rainfall at Nashotah combine to create really good gardens. The problem is that the growing season, compared to South Georgia, is very, very short. Seeds are planted in late spring, May; by mid-September there might

be the first frost, by mid-October the first snow. However, in the weeks between the gardens grow and grow and grow.

Many seminarians plant gardens, mostly vegetables such as sweet corn, carrots, radishes, beets, beans and tomatoes — lots and lots of tomatoes. Happy and I planted wildflowers, which was, I suppose, rather counter-cultural.

Of course, some of the seminarians traveled during the summer and didn't really tend the gardens they planted; some just lost interest, but most worked at it and made a real harvest. Then, once the season was over, the weeds quickly overwhelmed the area, and the plantings simply disappeared, submerged in the tangle.

I found that to be sad. I think there is a real sadness about gardens that are no longer tended, gardens that have received years of planning and work and love by some one. There is a house on Williams Street that, for many years, had a garden lovingly tended by an elderly man. It was a delight to see the flower beds so cared for. Last year he was gone; I don't know why or where. The flower beds faded away untended; this year they are gone, and a little corner of loving care is gone with them.

The gardens at Nashotah, overrun by a tangle of weeds and no longer cared for, had a special sadness, too. One very crisp and frosty September morning I was feeling that sadness looking at the field when a small spot of color caught my eye. It was bright red. Then I noticed another and another. So I walked over and found, under the weeds, beautiful little tomatoes, survivors.

"The harvest is plentiful; laborers are few," says Jesus to His Disciples. Perhaps that is as true today as ever. This is the age of weeds, all sorts of weeds. Most of the weeds have been growing for a long, long time: weeds such as self-pride and false idols, lots of false idols. There isn't much in the world out there that extols Our Lord's call to love and charity and humility.

And then, of course, we have our divisions and dissensions in the church, weeds of theological controversy that have little to do with His commission to us. It's as though the garden is being overwhelmed while the harvesters stand on the edge of the field arguing the fine points of agriculture.

We've been here before. If the history of the faith tells us anything, it is that the weeds may grow and seem to flourish but that the faith will survive; the faith will survive the weeds of dissension and the frost of neglect, irrepressible and utterly tenacious, waiting to be discovered once again.

In His Holy Name.