

Battle of the Mound

“The Mound” is a term that lives in infamy around our house. We mention it in hushed tones reserved for crude words we’ve overheard from others.

The Mound originated from a five-ton truckload of sticky, clay dirt we hauled in to fortify the retaining wall along the eastern edge of our house. Using a front-end loader and my shovel, we packed the 24 yards of dirt tightly against the cinder blocks. Then we furiously planted rosemary, Jerusalem sage, moss verbena, horse mint, salvia, and lantana. Alas, these plantings were no match for the weeds. Within weeks, the Mound was a crabgrass cocktail. To make matters worse, the thick, gooey soil made the practice of weeding more like pulling barbed wire out of concrete.

The bandages on my fingers are a tribute to my bi-annual Saturday wrestling match with crabgrass cornered between the wall and the Mound. The weeds grow so thickly around the bankroll of plants we’re trying to preserve that I must be careful with every energetic pull. I thrust my hand into another knot of weeds and verbena to realize that as the afternoon wears on I could almost do the job blindfolded. My fingers can distinguish between a long stem of salvia and a thin rapier of crabgrass. Even the resistances of different roots become tactilely recognizable after hours of duty on the Mound.

“Get to know your weeds,” I would stress to any aspiring gardener. You’ve got to know your competition. Get to know your weeds if you want to keep your flowers.

Similarly, I stress to any aspiring minister, “Get to know your sin.” Get to know it so well that you can distinguish it from the light emerging from the soil of your life. Remember, a dandelion masquerades as a bright yellow flower, but it’s a weed. Lucifer appears as an angel of light, but he will choke the life out of you. This is not easy work. Jesus knew that:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him ... ‘Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?’ But he replied, ‘No, for in gathering the weeds you may uproot the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest ...’ (Matt. 13:24-30).

Sin shines like a bright yellow dandelion bloom. When Eve “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and



pleasing to the eye, she took some of the fruit and ate...” (Gen. 3:6). Sin grows best in the soil of our own self-regard. “I deserve that,” we say, as we reach for fruit to fuel our insatiable egos. Then we wake up one morning to discover we’ve lost our bloom.

Superficial weeding will not amount to much. It’s easy to quickly pull the heads off the weeds so that our garden looks good for the weekend. I can tidy up my life for Sunday, but Monday arrives to reveal that I am still entangled in a mound of self-centered sin.

Bernard of Clairvaux, the great Benedictine reformer, said, “Where self-interest is present there is a corner, and in corners you will find rust and dirt” (*Fifth Step of Pride*). On that accord, an old army buddy of mine confided that he once prayed that God would show him his sin. “Don’t ever pray that prayer,” he breathlessly confessed later. “For two weeks, my sins, which I had neatly swept out of sight, were broadcast to me nonstop in Technicolor!” To weed out what is festering in the corners of our life is ghastly work. It, too, is like pulling stems of barbed wire out of concrete.

My wife and I have discovered the only remedy for the Mound is to cultivate a lively congregation of salvia, verbena, rosemary, sage, and thyme to outnumber and overtake the weeds. To fight flower with flower, you could say. It’s much the same with each one of us in our battle against sin. If we fill up the corners of our lives with good gifts from God, there will be less and less room for the crabgrass to take root in untended corners of our lives. “My way,” “my say-so,” “my position,” “my ministry,” and “my righteous anger” are no match for “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:19-23). The former are conceived in us. The latter are rooted securely in God.

Our guest columnist is the Rev. Patrick Gahan, rector of St. Stephen’s Church, Wimberley, Texas. This is the fifth in a series of personal reflections on the life of a priest.