

East Hartford
16 Ord 2014

Alice L. O'Donovan
Isaiah 44:6-8, Psa 86, Mt 13:24-43

Messy! Messy! Messy!

Wednesday was an ordinary day, and on Wednesday afternoon, I made an ordinary trip to Big Y, the closest supermarket to our home. I walked past the dairy case, where my eye fell on the label, "Pure Florida Orange Juice". Pure orange juice - that's a pretty good thing, right? After all we wouldn't want impure orange juice, now would we?

Then I went to the canned juice aisle, you know the one with the cans of red or purple or yellow fluid. Lots of juice drinks here, some actually have 10% juice in them. Well, I'm glad the juice is pure, but what about the 90% of the stuff in the can?

Then I wandered over to the aisle where they sell bars of soap. Show of hands, please. Who remembers the unique property of Ivory Soap? It floats. Who remembers the purity percentage of Ivory Soap?? 99 and 44/100 per cent pure. Some historical trivia for you, Ivory Soap began to float before 1891, and was advertised as 99 44/100 % pure in 1895. I checked a bar of regular Ivory soap, it's still advertised as 99 44/100 % pure. That's a 119 year obsession with purity.

I love some things which are pure. Some may pick pure honey as their personal favorite but I prefer pure Maple Syrup. Pure maple syrup - wonderful on crepes, or in real baked beans, on ice cream, and of course pancakes and French Toast.

Can we agree that when it comes to food, 100% pure is a good thing and that when it comes to soap - well perhaps 98% pure would be okay. What about people?

Within and between people, even between good friends, the notion of purity, the goal of purity can create much sighing and a certain amount of envy.

My parents were really good friends with another couple, Charley and Mildred Stroheker. I remember countless Sunday drives, evening visits in each others' homes all through my late elementary and high school years. But in the spring and summer months, my dad wrestled with the temptation of envy in a real life situation like our gospel story in that it involved weeds. Those plants that appear in all the wrong places.

Both Charley and my dad were avid gardeners, with dad being particularly interested in vegetable gardening. All summer and into the fall we feasted on fresh produce from Dad's garden - beginning with lettuce and radishes and continuing until my mother would heave a great sigh of relief as the inevitable frost would end the long parade of corn, tomatoes, and peppers from the garden into her kitchen.

There was always a friendly competition between Charley and my Dad regarding the firsts and the bests. "Got any peas, yet? How're your beans coming? What do you think of the Butter n Sugar or Silver Queen or the super sweet varieties of corn?" were often the first questions of a get together.

The competition went on year after year in a kind of even-Steven way with one exception. Charley Stroheker always won the purity contest. You see he was the gardener and grounds keeper where they lived whereas my dad worked full time as a banker. Gardening was his leisure time avocation. Charley Stroheker's gardens were pure. They were weed free. The only time our garden was weed free was the week after the spring rototilling - from the middle of May til late October my father sighed long and deep sighs, and looked at Charley's gardens with deep and abiding envy.

To his credit, Dad's envy never disrupted their friendship but he always mentioned Charley's weed free garden.

Yes, like my dad, I too have something of a veggie garden. Yes, like my dad, my garden purity ends about a week after I do the rototilling. Sigh.

When it comes to people, a really quick look at human history tells us that purity or the idea of purity, or what I am going to call the “temptation to purity” has created human disaster on an enormous scale. Consider the impact of the holocaust, Jim Crow laws, the Trail of Tears. Consider the impact of fundamentalist versus liberal understandings of faith in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

Friends, the requirement of, or the temptation to, or, the assumption of, purity has created issues even unto war between peoples, internationally, or interreligiously over the span of human history.

Likewise, the temptation to, or the assumption of purity, creates issues within our spirits, our souls, our very selves.

Being human is a messy, messy, messy proposition. There is no purity within us, even when we do good, it is so often out of mixed motive. There used to be a cartoon that illustrated that principle. The Boy Scout who helped the little old lady across the street, whether she wanted to go or not, because he needed the merit badge. In my very best professional, theological language, we are very mixed bags of stuff.

You may remember that my favorite biblical list is the list of the gifts of the spirit given us by Paul in his letter to the churches and faithful of Galatia. (Gal 5) You know it. The “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” list.

Each gift, each virtue, each capacity for goodness and life - has it’s opposite capacity for death and destruction.

Love vs apathy, joy vs grief, peace vs anxiety, patience vs impatience, kindness vs abuse, goodness vs evil, faithfulness vs betrayal, gentleness vs brutality, self-control vs a need to control others. All of us have capacity for both ends of the spectrum as well as our comfortable place on it.

Jesus spoke of wheat and weeds, and he also talked about people

as either sheep or goats, as if people are pure types. All goodness or all evil, but we are more complicated than that - we are both/and, rather than either/or. We are messy, messy, messy creatures rather than pure types of either love or apathy. Each of us is both sheep and goat. Each of us is a field bringing forth both wheat *and* weeds. We are both generous *and* selfish. We love passionately, even compassionately and we can be completely apathetic, we so do not care.

When Paul watched himself at life he noted that although he wanted to do good and love well, he found himself doing just the opposite. He said, "I don't do the good that I want to do, rather I do the evil that I don't want to do." (Ro 7)

Like the servants of this morning's parable we are often tempted to purity - to pulling out the weeds of our lives and spirits. Pulling the weeds of our spirits, like pulling the weeds from a field of wheat is a no-win dubious proposition at best. We become focused even obsessed with our weeds, and as we yank the weeds from our souls we can do profound damage to ourselves, not the least of which is to become very proud of our spiritual suffering and our humility. We are messy, messy, messy creatures indeed.

So what are we to do?

As a steadfast gardener, I would make one observation. When I water, I water the plants I want. When I fertilize, I put my good compost right into the hills of squash and beans to give them every advantage. I notice that as my squash and beans grow vigorously, there is so much shade under those plants that the weeds hardly get a running start. So I've learned to nurture the good stuff, the stuff I want in my garden. Not a perfect metaphor, but still a helpful living practice.

Far more importantly, I, we, can remember that it's not so much about us, about my self. It's about God. We live. So long as we live, we are constantly becoming. Paul, in writing to the folks at Corinth observed, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." (1 Cor. 15) God is, I

believe, steadfastly in love with us as we are, constantly forgiving us, and persistently working within us nurturing, nudging us along as we grow into the lovers God dreams we can become. Such is the nature, such is the way of our God.

Therefore, since it is about God, not about us, not about our striving, we can trust. We can relax into joy and thanksgiving for the steadfast ways that our God is all about love. What is that marvelous first line of Beethoven's great hymn? "Joyful, joyful, we adore you, God of glory, God of love. Hearts unfold like flowers before you opening to the sun above."

We are messy creatures, forgiven, blessed, cherished and nourished by Love, every moment of every day of our lives. Let's relax and rejoice in our God. Amen.