



There's this fence at our house that starts on the back end of our driveway and wraps around the yard behind, and it's been standing for...quite a few years, to say the least. And so as beautiful as the imagery is in Scripture, there is this vine that naggingly emerges every year, and doesn't treat our aged wooden fence all that well, not to mention that vine doesn't really play well with the plant life on the neighbor's side. So, every year I do my best to rip it down, and perhaps not as delicately as I should. Regardless, time and time again, it appears with just as much insistence and fervor in a place where it isn't

overly welcomed.

But, as for our neighbor on the other side of the fence, beyond being a nature enthusiast, she is very much a God-adorer, and even a people-cherisher, but she isn't exactly a church-goer. Nevertheless, I've heard her say a few times that she appreciates seeing somebody next door, every once in a while, wear a clerical collar, and whatever other more religious get-up; as if that brings some sense of comfort and hope to her...whatever the heck that means. And on top of her numerous times helping us with our lack of gardening commitment outside our home, she always makes our children feel as if they are the center of the entire universe when they stroll by her house, and, honestly, every interaction had with her...there's just something there. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but there's something there. And maybe it is a spiritual vine of sorts, wrapping around every conversation, every checking in, every offering of help; as if the vine can somehow reach that far up a drive from the nearest house of worship, and still manage to lift up love and compassion and a hope for all kinds of God's children.

And then, there's our other next-door neighbor: a retired attorney, but before he took on numerous court cases, he served in Vietnam, and still deals with not so pleasant realities from that, unfortunately. He has his fair share of stories, not all of which are exactly the *Reader's Digest* version of them, not all of which he hasn't just told once or twice, but a few more times than that and then some, and told in such a way where it's not exactly easy to side-step away from the story-telling. However, in spite of all he has witnessed, some of the most unpleasant parts of our humanity, there's still this God-adorer in him. There's still this people-cherisher in him. And no, not a church-goer either, but like the other neighbor, for some reason, appreciates seeing somebody nearby walk around with a clerical collar and whatever other religious get-up...whatever the heck that means. A rather different interaction with him than our other neighbor, but still...there's something there. I don't know how to explain it, but there's just something there. Maybe the vine, no matter how much even the clerical collar-wearer tries to side-step it, it still manages to find its way up to wrap around the places and people a little further drive away from the nearest house of worship.

Of course, for such cherished places, it's a rather big week coming up, so they say. And so, yes, we'll do our best to spiffy up our sanctuary joints, and we'll pull out all our musical stops, we'll try to be as professional as can be while also attempting to be hospitable and gracious; and we won't say it out loud, but we'll hope beyond hope that we can somehow convince the ones who only show up once or twice a year to stop by a few more times, at least. Having said all that, I'm sure this won't come off as a galivanting shock to anyone, but not everyone is going to come next week. Except maybe the vine can emerge beyond what we plan for the next ten days or so.

I wonder if there's something more to holding on to the words, "Holy Week," and not just because of what happened between a colt ride and disciples running long ago, but because of this year's rendition, too. That maybe something can also happen this time between this Sunday's palm waving and the Maundy Thursday communing and the Good Friday cross-adoring and the Easter Vigil tomb-waiting and well, you know what happens the next day. That maybe something can happen with this still

insistent and fervent vine, that insists on emerging in the Monday errand-running and the Tuesday restaurant-dining and the Wednesday last-minute preparing: that there might just be as much fervent love and passion for humanity emerging those days, too, for those who aren't so sure they want to try out the church-going quite yet.

Because as much as we want to keep the Vine away from those places, because obviously the Vine needs to stay in its certain sacred spaces; as much as we try to side-step it amidst our self-made holy schedules, the problem is this Vine just doesn't know how to stop growing. This Vine doesn't know how to stop emerging all over the place. This Vine doesn't know how to give up on them, and on us, too. And the other problem is with the Vine, is that it tends to bring along the branches, too. So, just be aware, you might just need to witness to love and compassion and hope and everlasting life even a few days early before we shout...well, you know what in about ten days. But even if we do try to remove or side-step, don't worry, this Vine will always rise again. So, for that Greatest News for all our days, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!