

March 21, 2021

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

John 12: 20-28a

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What Happens to the Seed

This is a sermon about what happens to the seed.

Jesus said that “unless it falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.” A solitary seed, a single grain left on a shelf in the shed, spilled into a crack between the boards of the floor, swept into a corner and forgotten... So many things can happen to a seed – or not happen. If it sits somewhere, inert, untouched, preserved, it still exists, it stays as itself; but nothing happens. By only existing, it loses its life.

A few years after the time of Jesus, in a fortress called Masada on the western shore of the Dead Sea, a group of Jewish rebels took their last stand against the Roman army and were annihilated. In the ruins of that place, a few years ago, archaeologists found date pits. Presumably, somebody had eaten the fruit sometime before the final siege, then tossed the seeds into a crevice, a basket, somewhere dry and empty and forgotten. The seeds remained alone, inert, for about 2,000 years – until the archaeologists found them a few years ago and tried planting one because, why not? As of the last news story I could find about it, it was growing into a healthy date palm sapling. They’ll have to be patient, though: the thing about date palms is they take more than a generation to mature to the point of bearing fruit. So it is said that planting dates is an act of love for the future – because you will never meet those who will be fed by your radical little act of horticulture.

But what happens to the seed when it sits undisturbed, by itself? It remains alone.

This is a sermon about the hour.

When Philip and Andrew told Jesus that there were Greeks at the Passover festival who had come a long way and wanted to see him, they remembered later that Jesus responded by saying, “the hour has come.” Those Greeks were probably some of the people who were known then as “God-fearers,” people from somewhere else who were drawn to the message and practice of a religion that was trying to *turn* the social order – in the direction of righteousness, in the direction of love of neighbor, in the direction of God’s active engagement in

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history. That those Greeks had traveled to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover meant that they were looking for something, perhaps longing for something – and their attentiveness was a sign of the times for Jesus, the man of the hour. They said they wished to see him, and so it was clear that the word was out about the itinerant rabbi: they'd heard about the healings, the feedings, the blessings, and knew that something important was afoot, that time was ripe, that a corner had been turned. "We wish to see Jesus," they said with their accents from away – and Jesus felt the world turn. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," he said back. There's no keeping this under wraps any more. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel. The seed finds its way to the soil. The time had come.

This is a sermon about dying.

That's what Jesus said happens to the seed, the tiny grain, when its hour has come – when the time is right, ready. That's what Jesus said would happen to him when the time came – and now here it was, and though he had been saying it pretty much from the beginning, eventually they'd remember that it was when the Greeks came and were asking for him that he realized that the hour was finally at hand. He had begun by calling the world to turn away from darkness, toward the Light. Now the turning was unmistakable – and it was going to get the attention of people whose power was a cover for their fear of what they had to lose when God started winning – people who'd think nothing of wielding death to protect their power.

It was when the Greeks came wanting to see the source of the turning they felt that Jesus knew that the hour was at hand, that the seed had fallen into the good soil of time and was going soon to do what a seed does – which is to give itself away in order to become what it can become. And they could all see the scope of what had to happen now register on his face, hear it in the timbre of his voice – and later they'd remember that it was the day the Greeks came asking to see him that he said, "Now my soul is troubled." They'd never be able to forget that he wondered whether he could dare to pray for the cup to pass him by – and they even wrote it down. They'd remember that he, who prayed so freely, and taught them to pray, always with confidence, *Our Father in heaven, holy is your name* – he, now, at least for a moment, was wondering if there was any other way for God's will to be done, any way for the seed to grow without giving itself away. Any way for the hour to be fulfilled short of pouring out the last drop.

This is a sermon about compassion.

Whatever fear Jesus may have felt in contemplating the falling of the seed into the ground, still somehow he found it in himself to say, "No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour" – and they heard that, too, and remembered it. If he had stopped short of the fear – if he had turned away from the glaring finitude every one of us faces, and taken a pass on the danger that always lurks in this world as long as there are people who wield violence to cover their fear, as long as there are people who think the only way to fight death is with more death – if he had not followed us into the valley of those shadows, then we could not follow him. The lessons of compassion we've been learning this Lent from Henri Nouwen and others teach us that there is no way to practice accompaniment remotely. What God did, and does, in Jesus, is climb into the midst of what we suffer



so as to be beside us to accompany our deepest fear – to teach us not to close ourselves against the hurt of life but to live, with him, right through it.

For some years I had the privilege of accompanying a handful of Williams College students to Nicaragua – to introduce them to cherished friends there, and to a courageous history, a luminous culture and a breathtaking conviction among the poorest people in our hemisphere that the world *is* turning the reign of God. In order for the students to feel the turning, we had to go and see – and so we spent a month living in communities where most of a family’s possessions would fit into the small duffle bags we brought with us as luggage – where the children we played with while we were there went hungry more than we knew when we were gone. And since becoming friends means hearing stories, it was also a month of stories about the ways in which our country, the place we call home, had imposed tremendous hardship and suffering on people who were becoming our dear friends. Over the course of the month it changed the way we saw the Nicaraguans, of course. But it was on the way home, usually, that one of the students finally found voice to tell the truth of the trip: that the point had not been to do something that made us feel better about ourselves – but to have our hearts broken. It wasn’t about meeting Nicaraguans. It was about enlisting their help in finally meeting ourselves. Entering their struggle was the only way to do our own work.

“Behold, the days are surely coming,’ says the Lord [through the voice of the prophet Jeremiah], “when I will make a new covenant with my people... I will write my law within them, and I will inscribe it upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.... And they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.”

What happens to the seed? The tiny vessel wrapped tightly in its impervious case contains on its heart the writing that God has inscribed there: the covenant of God’s law, which is justice, and God’s nature, which is love, and God habit, which is compassion, inside the seed like its infinitesimal code of DNA. The seed contains the truth – and it has to be planted, to fall into the ground and be utterly opened, given away even, in order to bloom.

This is a sermon about eternal life.

(This part of it is pretty short: only to say that I don’t really know very much about it, having never been there.)

Jesus said, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” Now it’s in this very

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same gospel of John that Jesus says, “I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10) – so when Jesus speaks of “those who hate their life in this world” I don’t think he quite means “hate” the way we use it as a synonym for detest or denigrate or denounce. I think he means that, if you pay attention, you’ll notice that there are two ways of holding the life you contain: this way [a clenched fist], and this way [an open palm]. What looks like “loving” it is really holding it back, withholding it, being unwilling to spend it for fear that living it will kill you – “loving” it to the point of tying yourself in knots to keep the gift to yourself. But the seed, if it only just exists by itself, loses its life. And, on the other hand, what looks like “hating” it is really just spending it freely, understanding that it’s not so much your possession as it is the gift you have to give back.

On the day the Greeks came wanting to see for themselves what that kind of living looked like, Jesus knew that the hour was at hand for the seed [clenched fist] to fall into the ground [open palm]. I don’t know how to guess how much Jesus himself knew about what eternal life actually is. But, really, you only have to know one thing: if you know the part of God that those Greeks could see in Jesus – and that is that he said that he’d lead the way to it, and he said it with his life wide open, and then planted himself, the seed, so that everything could change.

This is a sermon about what happens to the seed.

This is a church about what happens to the seed – when, however much time the seed, the tiny grain, may have spent in the dry darkness, alone, it touches down at last in the rich matrix of time, the right time, the ripe time, where it’s watered by forgiveness and kissed by a peace that passes all understanding. This is a church that’s waiting to find out what happens to the seed that contains the covenant engraved upon it when it gives itself away in order to become what it might become. Planting that seed is an act of love for the future – because even if you never meet those who will be fed by your radical little act of horticulture, there is no containing the abundance of the life that it will yield – a hundred-fold, a thousand-fold, a billion-fold.