

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d’Alene
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 17, 2024
10am

Text: John 12:20-33

Theme: The Shadow of Death

[prayer]

The other morning, I was making my usual cup of coffee. We keep our grounds in a simple white ceramic canister. The canister is part of a set that once belonged to my great-grandmother – my “G.G.” As I put the canister back in its usual place, it struck me that it has been twenty-two years this month since she died.

I was fortunate to know several of my great-grandparents, but I knew my G.G. the best. She died when I was eleven, just a few months before her 89th birthday. Her memorial service was my first. I do not remember it being a very sad service – no one wore black, there was sunshine streaming through the church windows, and a feeling of spring in the air. We sang the “Hymn of Promise.” The hymn’s composer, Natalie Sleeth, was inspired by “life, death, spring and winter, Good Friday and Easter, and the whole reawakening of the world that happens every spring.”¹ The first time I can recall singing that hymn is at my G.G.’s memorial service. And the experience of singing the final stanza – “In our end is our beginning” – was my first education on the great paradox that lies at the heart of our faith.

[pause]

Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever” (John 12:24-25 CEB).

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-in-the-bulb-there-is-a-flower>

This is the Gospel paradox: Death yields life. We perhaps understand this best at this time of year when we begin to see the fruits of fall's decay. Tuesday is the first day of spring and the signs are already visible – trees are budding, robins are hunting for worms, and something green is poking through the dirt by the church doors. A few more months and our lawns and garden beds will probably feature some dandelion weeds. Recall that those bright yellow flowers are the result of the wispy white seeds that dying dandelions released in the last days of summer. Death yields life.

A few years after my G.G. died, I read Catherine Marshall's novel *Christy* about a young schoolteacher in rural Appalachia in the early 20th century. Towards the end of the novel, Christy is mourning the death of a dear friend. She questions whether the resurrection of the body is real. The village minister, David, says this to her: "Man's a part of the natural order, and dying each winter and being resurrected each spring is part of the rhythm, the normal ebb and flow of life. Surely, if it happens to mere flowers and trees, it happens to us."

Perhaps this creation rhythm is why Jesus chose to use an agricultural analogy to forecast his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. He assures his disciples that his impending death has a purpose: To bear fruit. Not a single fruit, but "much fruit." Plural fruit. The fruit are his followers. Do you remember what Jesus told the disciples after he met the Samaritan woman at the well? He sent her home rejoicing and then he turned to the twelve and he said: "Look, I tell you: open your eyes and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest...I have sent you to harvest what you didn't work hard for; others worked hard, and you will share in their hard work" (John 4:35, 38).

Jesus has done the hard work of dying for us. The single seed of his body was buried in the earth. And out of that seed sprouted and grew a mission that has encompassed the whole world and endured for two thousand years. Jesus's death made way for the birth of his Church. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and now his Church stands as his body on the earth – billions of disciples spread across time and space and cultures, bearing the fruits of God's kingdom in our homes and neighborhoods and communities.

We bear that fruit by living lives that imitate the surrender Jesus demonstrated through his death. “Whoever serves me must follow me” and “Wherever I am, there my servant will also be” (v. 26). We follow Jesus wherever he goes. And Jesus often leads us to extremes: The extremes of our wants, our needs, our discomfort, our belief about what is possible. Jesus does this to show us our idols – the things we routinely put before our relationship with God. Our idols are the things we think are necessary to live happy and fulfilled lives...but Jesus shows us another way.

“Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever” (v. 25). A different word for “hate” is “spurn” or “reject” – “Those who *spurn* or *reject* their lives...will keep them forever.”

Let me be clear: Jesus is not encouraging self-hatred. Nor is he telling us to be reckless with our lives, or neglectful of them. Life is a precious gift from God to be enjoyed and cared for.

What Jesus *is* encouraging is good *stewardship* of our lives. Jesus asks us to cultivate our lives not for selfish gain, but for a righteous rather purpose: The blessing of others and the growth of God’s kingdom. Modern life is all about acquisition – acquiring money and things and fame and power and success. But the Way of Jesus is the opposite. The Way of Jesus is about letting go – to die, and go into the earth, and bear as much fruit as God wills. We do not cling to our lives on the world’s terms. Instead, we surrender them to God so that they can be instruments of His glory. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “My Father will honor whoever serves me” (v. 26). When we surrender our lives to the service of Jesus, God honors us by multiplying our lives – not in terms of time, but in terms of impact. When we surrender our lives to God, we become a partner in God’s eternal purposes. We die to ourselves and are resurrected in the blessing that we become, multiplied and poured out for God’s kingdom glory.

This surrender and letting go will inevitably look like failure to the world. Jesus did not ascend to a throne. He ascended to a cross, and then he died. “The time has come for the Human One to be glorified...When I am lifted up [exalted] from the earth, I will draw everyone to me” (vv. 23, 32). Imagine the perverse image of all people flocking to this bloodied, beaten, and crucified man. How can this possibly be the glory of God?

Obedience, servanthood, self-sacrificing love – these are the realms where God’s glory dwells. Jesus gave flesh to the Gospel through his death and resurrection. This is how we “see” God – crowned on a cross. And now, as the Body of Christ on earth, all people will “see” God through us – through our obedience and servanthood and self-sacrificing love.

Every one of us will die a literal death; we all live in that shadow. When Jesus called upon his disciples to lose their lives for His sake, some have indeed suffered that fate – martyred for their faith. Most of us, though, are called to die a different kind of death. We are called to practice the daily discipline of letting go of our self-centered isolation and surrendering to a generous life that is lived for others in beloved community – a community where every person belongs, and every person can flourish.

[pause]

The week before last I gathered with our Resilient Church cohort for training and discussion and prayer around the future of the church. Although the six churches in the cohort vary in size and tradition and context, all six acknowledge the fragility of our communities. Churches live in the shadow of death, too. There are 350,000 church congregations in the United States, and roughly a third are on the brink of closing.²

Our congregation has lived for 140 years. We hold big questions and some anxiety about our future as Methodists in Coeur d’Alene. That is okay; even Jesus showed some fear at his crucifixion. “Now I am deeply troubled...But what should I say? ‘Father, save me from this time’? No, for this is the reason I have come to this time. Father, glorify your name!” (vv. 27-28).

The teaching of Jesus is clear: If we want to find life, we must first die. In God’s kingdom, death is a movement in the rhythm of resurrection. This movement applies to our life as a community of faith. Which causes me to wonder...what do we need to let go of so we can be a community of faith that bears generous fruit for our neighbors? What do we need to surrender to God so we can become a better reflection of the beloved community God is calling us to be?

² <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/17/1175452002/church-closings-religious-affiliation>

As we prayerfully discern our mission and ministry, we have to pause and consider how we make our survival an idol.

[pause]

Let's listen to Jesus' words once more: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever" (vv. 24-25 CEB).

Christ lived this analogy. His death bore magnificent fruit – the Church universal, gathered in his name here at Community UMC and around the world. We are called to a life of discipleship that will also bear fruit for the kingdom of God. If we desire to see and serve Jesus, he makes it clear that we must follow his example. It is only by dying to ourselves – letting go and repenting of the things that keep us from being in right relationship with God – that we can then show forth the love of God, whose Spirit will bear fruit in our lives and the lives of others.

God was glorified in Christ's surrender to the cross and God is glorified in our surrender, as well. I encourage you to reflect this week on what the Spirit is prodding you to let go of. What needs to die in your life in order to bear fruit? What is already decayed and dying, waiting to be offered up as fertile ground for a new spiritual crop?

"The time has come for the Human One to be glorified." As we approach Holy Week, may Jesus be glorified in our dying to self and rising to new life in him – a community of believers who faces the cross daily and humbly declares, "This is how we will follow him."

Amen.