

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, March 22, 2015

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 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. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Let us pray....Amen.

Most of you know me well enough by now: I love a good gardening metaphor! In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus uses the wheat grain as a metaphor for his resurrection.

“...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’

His metaphor speaks to his dying, and the many fruits that will come of his resurrection. And though Jesus wasn't a botanist, or a biologist, he knew this about the wheat grain: one wheat grain produces between 30 and 80 grains. And of course, his death produced an infinite amount of forgiveness...

But Jesus wasn't just speaking about himself. Immediately after his statement about the wheat grain, he says this: ‘Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.’ Now, the word hate is an awfully strong word here, and probably needs to be taken with some caution. Jesus is speaking about those who look beyond this earthly life, to the eternal life, and those who do not. And, in that context, those who have their sights set on the eternal life would value *that* far more than their earthly life.

But if we apply our wheat grain metaphor to our earthly lives, unless our earthly lives die, they remain just earthly lives, but if they die, they bear much fruit in the eternal life. This represents the ultimate in self-sacrifice, where the faithful followers of Jesus know that their earthly lives are only the beginning, but if we only love our earthly lives, that's all we'll ever have.

Following Jesus, serving Jesus, well that means a certain sacrifice of our earthly existence. And we can't hope for the eternal life when we're spending all our time trying to protect our earthly existence. No fruit will come when all we do is covet our lives here on earth. Much fruit will come when we accept that our earthly lives are temporary, a means to an eternal end...

Before seminary, I had a career, a vocation, in serving the disabled. Various administrator positions came up, assistant supervisor, supervisor, compliance positions, I was on a ladder that lead to what I thought was an executive position. I'm sure I thought that I was following my faith, using my gifts, making my career my ministry.

So it was especially painful to have been let go, to have that dream die, to have the earthly existence of my career simply end. Sure, I immediately went out and got another job doing similar work, new place, new start. Wrong. That position ended. I was the wrong person for the job. The career I thought I had, was dead. And I was stunned to find that from the death of my coveted career path to executive status, came the fruits of ministry! Circumstances or Providence, my seminary experience led me to understand that I was meant to be in some form of ministry, and that my former work life, my earthly work life, was dead.

Perhaps you've had a similar experience, where you were going along, minding your own business, and wham! Dead end. Something in your life ends, dies, and you are left to discern what it all means. At the moment, it's pretty painful, but as time goes on, the pain lessens, and some clarity helps you see what's next.

The whole door closing, window opening thing is close, but it barely touches the sacred aspect of an earthly aspect of our lives dying, only to bring about a sacred aspect of our eternal lives...

Can you remember when an aspect of your earthly life died? I apologize if it's painful for you, I don't meant to dredge up painful feelings, but I do want us to make a connection to the resurrection aspects of our losses: much fruit can come from the death of an earthly aspect of our lives. When we love our earthly lives so much that we begin to live so as to protect the status quo, we put our eternal lives in jeopardy. Following and serving Jesus means letting go of our fragile grasp on our earthly lives, and reaching for the eternal life Jesus means for us to have.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that Jesus chose bread at the last supper to represent his body, broken for us. Bread made from wheat. That died in the ground, and produced the grains that were ground to make bread. And the new covenant in his blood is the new covenant we hear of in our Jeremiah passage this morning. A new promise from God, for forgiveness and unconditional love.

Fruits that are born from the earthly death our Lord and Savior.

Now, we don't have to just look to the past to see what earthly aspects of our lives have passed away and born fruit: what aspects of our lives *today* need to pass away in order to bear much fruit? We each can discern, and reflect on how much we love our earthly lives, or how much we ache for the eternal life.

Jesus intended for his words to be encouraging and comforting. I find them disturbing and scary! I don't want my life disrupted anymore!

And yet, there is a certain foundational truth about our God-given lives that we all sense, even if we don't care to boldly gaze upon it: we're only here to serve Jesus, to follow Jesus. And he told us to love God, and love each other as we love ourselves.

If we don't do those things, then we're dangerously close to telling the world, and God, that we love our earthly lives way more than any promise of eternal life. And, according to Jesus, we are at risk for losing our lives as we know them. The only way to secure our lives in an eternal sense, is to be willing to sacrifice them for Jesus. The only way to bear much fruit, is to be willing to let our earthly lives die in the ground, holding faith in the fruit that will come.

Lent is a perfect time to reflect on the earthly aspects of our lives that may need to die before we can bear much fruit. A slightly darker time, (more so in Syracuse than in much of the world!), a time where we may have set aside some of the comforts and routines that please us in order to sharpen our perceptions of the sacred.

In the coming weeks, in the midst of the triumph of Palm Sunday, to the utter despair and mourning of Good Friday, we can look inside ourselves to see where we are on the spectrum of loving our earthly lives to aching for our eternal lives. There is no right or wrong answer, no good or bad answer, only the promise from Jesus that when we serve him, we follow him, and when we serve him, God honors us. Now *that* I find comforting! It doesn't take

away the fear I have for what it will feel like to sacrifice my earthly life for Jesus, but it does make it easier for me to move in the direction of eternal life. To move toward what we already know is coming: the Easter Miracle. The fruits of the resurrection, meant for us.

Look: even Jesus admitted that his soul was troubled. This stuff was disturbing even for him! But he knew that he couldn't shy away from the reason he was sent. God's voice from the heavens was a thunderous punctuation to what Jesus had just told his disciples.

When we contemplate our own call, when we work to discern what we feel about our earthly lives, and what we will do to secure our eternal lives, it's not likely that God's thunderous voice will come from the heavens. We have to make those choices based on God's promise in Jeremiah, and on Jesus' promise in John. Is that enough to go on?

It will have to be. Do we love our lives here on earth? Of course we do. But do we love them so much that we fail to act on our faith, fail to strive for the eternal life we have been promised? Why are we here? What are we supposed to be doing? Is it enough?

Are we serving Jesus? Are we following Jesus? Is this the right path?

Through prayer and contemplation, we can discern the fruits that can come from following Jesus. I intend to spend some time doing just that, between now and Easter. I hope you will join me.

What better time to reflect on the idea that when a grain of wheat dies and is put in the ground, it bursts forth with 30 to 80 times more grain? What better time to reflect on the good news that when an aspect of our earthly lives dies, we have the potential to bear much fruit. Our Easter celebration will be far richer for the effort. Amen.