

April 6, 2003
Sixth Sunday in Lent
David L. Edwards

Dying to Live

John 12:20-26 *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.*

Some Greeks were in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, and they wanted to meet Jesus. This is a sign that the Gospel is beginning to reach beyond Israel, into the wider world. These may be the ones Jesus referred to earlier in John's gospel, when he spoke of having other sheep to bring in to his fold.(10:16) This incident seems to confirm the fears of the Pharisees, as they felt control over the spiritual lives of people slipping from their fingers: "We can do nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after him!"(12:19)

Andrew and Philip go to Jesus on behalf of the Greeks. Jesus' response is very puzzling: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." He is talking about his death and resurrection. Why on earth doesn't Jesus show an interest in these Greeks? Evidently they want more than just a friendly chat. They are potential disciples. Here's a real break-through in the making. Jesus' message is getting out. He's on the verge of something big.

Jesus seems so uninterested in success, at least as we define it. Bigger congregations and bigger buildings. Having a high-profile minister. Multiple staffs. Multiple worship services. Multiple programs. Multiple buildings. If your church is not "growing" in these ways, there must be something wrong with you. At the precise moment when things could get really big, Jesus says its time for his death. Jesus is not concerned with outward appearances but inward purposes being fulfilled, beginning with his own.

"Very truly, I tell you," says Jesus, "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." The fruitfulness of Jesus' life will be fully displayed in his death. Just staying alive isn't fruitful. Preserving his own life isn't fruitful. Becoming a prominent religious leader isn't fruitful. Only his death will produce the fruit.

Jesus knows he is going to die. But he also seems to be able to choose the "hour" of his death. Back in the 10th chapter of John, Jesus says this: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again." Later in the Gospel of John Jesus tells the disciples that they share this same power. They can have a greater love that lays its life down for others. Imagine! We DO have control over our life and death. NOT the power to avoid death or

choose the time and manner of our death. Of course not. But we can pick up our lives and lay them down. We can live in such a way that we embrace the fact of our dying, and choose to live in ways that transcend death and fear.

Jesus uses the image of the seed. If the seed doesn't die, it remains alone. It remains just a seed. It doesn't fulfill its purpose, it's true nature. I was preaching a sermon on this passage at my first congregation out of seminary. There were some farmers in the congregation. One of them came up to me afterwards and said, "You know, that never made any sense to me. A seed doesn't die. It just changes into a plant." Bingo!

In the 1960s Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's milestone book ON DEATH AND DYING helped us face the reality of death. The grief process is real and important. It must be understood and taken seriously. Also, we live in a death-denying culture. Everything around us spins the illusion that we are not going to die. I've come to believe that each of us lives into our thirties, forties, or fifties, believing that somehow WE are going to be the exception to death! Real spiritual growth begins when it dawns on us that there are no exceptions. Then we can begin the truly important work of how we are going to live in light of our death.

Having said all of that, I want to go back to that farmer's statement. The seed doesn't die. It doesn't cease to exist. It changes form. It enters into the dark, moist mystery of the earth, and becomes a whitish sprout that pokes up into the air as a green shoot. Jesus took death very seriously. He did not meet his impending death with emotionless stoicism. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death.* (Heb. 5:7) Jesus struggled mightily, just like us, to live with, toward, and through his death. Nonetheless, Jesus chooses this seed business to set death within a far greater reality—the whole depth and scope of life. Jesus' dying will bear fruit for all people. His "going away" will release in people God's spirit, so that they find their own lives in God, so that they, too, give their lives.

Death is part of the vast and mysterious process of life. I quote again from Elaine Marie Prevallet: **everything lives only by sharing its life.** In autumn the leaves fall from the tree. We say that they "die." But they lie on the earth through the winter and through seasons to come. They become part of the earth again. They change form. They become the mulch, the humus, nature's compost, and then they become the sap coursing through the trunk and limbs of the trees. Someone close to us dies, a friend or a parent. And once we begin to come out of our grief and sorrow, we start to notice something. In a mysterious but very real way, that person's spirit is with us as it never was before. It is as though, with the body out of the way, the fullness, the essence of that person begins to inhabit our hearts, our memories, our sensibilities. In Judaism there is a strong belief that people live on in our memories. This kind of memory is not just thinking about things from the past. It is the real persistence of that person's life with us and in us. We must not overlook the reality of death and grief. However, it would be also shallow and

unrealistic for us to fail to understand the deep mystery of the process of death and life.

When my parents died in 1993, I experienced what others had told me about. It was as though a kind of buffer was removed between me and my own death. It was only an illusion, really, this buffer. As I entered my fifties, death was no more a theory or idea but a reality of my life. I needed to come to terms with it. At times I feel a kind of cold fear as I am aware of this reality and feel frozen, stuck. Yet, what I have also found is that when I am engaged in giving, in going beyond myself for others, there is no fear of death. It is not a denial of death or avoidance. It is a true overcoming of death that I experience, the realization that true life, which Jesus called "eternal life," is touched as we respond to death and life by giving, by letting go, by opening up to others and to life itself.

It is by giving up our attempts to grasp and hold onto our lives that we find real life. Jesus put it this way: *Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* I don't think Jesus meant an emotional hatred of life, a rejection of the world as God created it. He was speaking of that paradox of dying in order to live, of letting go of our lives in order to find our true life. Henri Nouwen, in The Life of the Beloved, which we are reading together for our Wednesday night classes, writes, *One of the greatest acts of faith is to believe that the few years we live on this earth are like a little seed planted in a very rich soil. For this seed to bear fruit, it must die.*

The life of faith is a daily dying to ourselves—our fears, our guilt, our self-absorptions—so that we can find our greater, truer selves, the eternal life Jesus spoke of. The inward journey of our spiritual life is a matter of growing in awareness of those things in us that shrink away from this fuller life, the things that we need to let die. Not kill! We don't want to turn our inner life into a battleground. But with patient and grace-filled love, we can acknowledge the ways we are still clinging to, grasping onto our lives, and let the light of God's love shine upon them through our awareness. And we can nourish in ourselves those tender and green shoots of new life—forgiveness and acceptance of others and ourselves, and thankfulness. Our outward lives then can become the journey of reaching beyond ourselves in ways that nourish and nurture new life for the world. The dying is not easy. It is often painful to let go of our fears and unsatisfying ways of thinking and acting. But Jesus' life, death, and resurrection keep reminding us that only in dying do we truly live, each day of our lives and at the close of this life.