

Unless the Seed Dies

John 12:20-26 *Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless and grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit...."*

Some Greeks were in Jerusalem for the Passover and they asked to "see" Jesus. Maybe they wanted to become disciples. Or maybe they were just curious. We don't know why they wanted to meet Jesus. Earlier in John's gospel [10:16], Jesus said that he had "other sheep" to bring into his fold, people beyond the boundaries of Israel itself. These would also listen to his voice and follow him as their shepherd. The arrival of these Gentiles signals a potential widening of the circle of those hearing and responding to the good news of God's love and kingdom.

Philip and Andrew announce the visitors to Jesus, but his response is puzzling. He seems not to respond at all. Instead, he says that now it is time for the Son of Man to be glorified. This is the Gospel of John's way of talking about Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. It is the final unfolding of Jesus' life purpose.

Why would Jesus not want to meet with these people? Here is a prime opportunity to get his message to the wider world. Maybe he could even establish a "department for the expansion of the Gospel" or something like that, and increase his following throughout the Mediterranean world! Just when Jesus seems to be on the verge of success, he turns away and starts talking about suffering and dying. What's this about?

This is not unusual behavior for Jesus. In the gospels, Jesus consistently shows no interest in what the world considers success or effectiveness or achievement. Right after his baptism, he was in the town of Capernaum teaching and healing [Mk. 1:35-39]. People were flocking to him with their needs. One morning before dawn he managed to slip away to center himself in prayer. However, his disciples searched him out to tell him that there were lots more folks needing his help. What did he do? He said it was time to move on to other towns where he could preach and teach about God's kingdom. That's what he was called to do. He didn't heal everyone. He didn't meet every need. His life had another purpose, another calling that he needed to stay centered on. To truly be of help to people, Jesus needed to keep centered on his vocation, his calling.

Then one day he asked his disciples who they thought he was [Matt. 16:13ff; Mk. 8:27ff; Lk. 9:18ff]. Peter piped right up to say that he believed Jesus was indeed the messiah, the one God had sent to bring salvation to the world. Right, said Jesus, and this is how it's going to be—the Son of Man will be rejected, suffer, and be killed. Peter was appalled at such defeatist talk. That's no way to build a successful religious movement! Jesus then upbraided Peter and called him a stumbling block and even worse—Satan! Get out of my way! You are not on God's side!

In choosing not to meet with these Greeks, Jesus is consistent with his whole life and teachings. What is most important, what does the world the most good is to know what we are called by God to do with our lives and to keep focused on that. Not yielding to the pressure to be successful or popular or effective, but to be who God has called us to be and do what God gives us to do. For Jesus, this meant remaining centered on his own life's mission and living it faithfully to the end. If the expansion of the Gospel beyond Israel was to take place—which is what eventually happened--it needed to do so in God's good time and purposes. And those purposes are best served as we remain faithful to what we feel God has called us to be and do.

Here is where we often get lost. The way of being faithful as Jesus' community may look and feel a lot like failure, in the measure taken by the world we live in. Trying to perpetuate ourselves as the church is not the way of following Jesus. The way of true security is not clinging to self-interest or self-promotion or self-protection. It is important that we as a faith community not get caught up in self-perpetuation but try to remain focused on the importance of each person being on that inward and outward journey of faithfulness to God's call in our lives. Not spending our spiritual energy worrying about where the money is going to come from, or whether or not the particular mission we feel called to is going to succeed. It is not an easy way. But it is the way of trust, of faith and faithfulness. It is the way of allowing God to work through us what God wants to do for the world. It asks of us a constant working with our own spiritual lives to learn how to empty ourselves so that God can use us as channels, as instruments. And it calls for our making the sometimes difficult choices of what we are and are not called to do.

Then Jesus goes on to explain what is going to happen to him. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, by itself, doing no one any good. But if it dies, it bears fruit. I remember speaking on this text early in my ministry at Antioch Christian Church in Kentucky. After the service that day, one of the farmers in our church was talking with me about what Jesus said. In his quiet and wise way

that came from a lifetime of work in cooperation with nature, he said, “You know, the grain doesn’t really die.” Exactly! The grain doesn’t die. It changes form. It gives itself to its own inner nature, that is, to go into the earth and become a seedling, then a stalk of wheat or corn. The form of the seed changes so that new life can happen. Jesus was talking about a deeper reality, that our true being, our true nature is to give ourselves in the service of life. The very pattern of life in the creation, in nature itself, is the pattern of our own lives. We are made to give. And it means a kind of dying, of letting go, of changing form.

Jesus then puts it more forcefully. Those who love their lives lose them. Those who hate their lives in this world keep their lives forever. I love life. I think most of us love life. There is much that is difficult about our lives in this world. But there is also much that is beautiful, good, and delightful. However, that’s not what Jesus was talking about. By “loving” our lives in this world, he meant clinging to them, refusing to change, to be transformed. He meant living only for ourselves. By “hating” our lives, Jesus did not mean self-hatred or guilt or seeing the world as evil. If he believed that, he would not have said that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. He would not have had the regard for the world as God’s creation that he revealed in his teachings.

Jesus said the same thing before in other ways [Matt. 10:37-39; Mk. 8:34-35; Lk. 9:23-24]. If you try to grasp your life, you lose it. If you let go of your life, you find it. That’s what Jesus meant by “loving” or “hating” our lives. If we try to hang onto our lives, try to build a wall of security around ourselves or our church or our nation or whatever, it has the opposite effect. It doesn’t bring life, real life, but destruction and unhappiness. Only by letting go do we find life. Only as we learn how to abandon our quests for securing ourselves do we begin to experience what it means to enter fully into the process of life itself. Hating our lives in the world means letting go of our efforts to control everyone and everything, including ourselves. It means opening ourselves up to God and God’s spirit. It means laying down the burdens of fear that keep us from living fully and freely the lives God has given us to live.

This is what our inward and outward journeys are about. The inward journey is the way we come to deeper understanding of ourselves, knowing where we are fearful and clinging, where we are making ourselves miserable by trying to secure ourselves. The inward journey is also where we begin to discern what we are truly made to be and to do, what God in Christ is calling us to give to the world. That becomes our outward journey, our mission, our ministry, to give to other people and the world out of the uniqueness of our own being, our gifts, and our lives. That is where our own lives touch the needs of the world.

As I meditated on this story from John’s gospel this week, it shed light on these two important things: 1) staying centered on what we are called to be and to do with our lives, and 2) discovering and living out of the paradox of letting go of our lives so that we truly find our lives, of dying so that we bear much fruit. There will be many times when something comes along to distract us from that particular journey God has called us to. Not only difficult and painful experiences that make us discouraged and want to give up, but also enticing opportunities that seem exciting and full of the promise of success or effectiveness or whatever. Jesus’ puzzling response, or lack of it, to the Gentile seekers and his turning toward his suffering and death made me think about how important it is that each of us remain as true as we can to who we are and what we feel God has called us to do. That is the best thing we can do for the world. We each have this one precious and wonderful life that God has given us. When we live it in communion with God and for God’s purposes, when we give ourselves fully and whole-heartedly to that journey, then we are the seed that is always dying so that it can bear the fruit of God’s love.