

“Seeds, Death, and Spiritual Fruit”

John 12:20-33

March 22, 2015

Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service

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This is the fifth Sunday in the season of Lent – a season where we especially remember and reflect on the suffering and death of Christ – and so our text for tonight is a common Gospel reading for Lent, a text that hits on that theme.

Our text is from the Gospel of John 12:20-33. This passage takes place in Jerusalem, right after Jesus’s triumphal entry, close to the feast of Passover, and in the period leading up to his crucifixion on Good Friday.

You can turn to John 12 in the pew Bible, or you can simply listen along. In either case, this is God’s word for us this evening – please listen carefully.

John 12, starting with verse 20:

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹ So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

²⁷ “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

This is God’s word.

Our text tonight is one of those texts where, if we’re honest, I think, if we read the dialogue carefully, we’re sort of confused by Jesus and we feel some sympathy for the disciples.

Things seem to be going well in the Gospel of John at this point. Jesus enters Jerusalem and is greeted by a crowd that hails him as the king of Israel. Next, two Greeks – that is two gentiles, two non-Jews (they were not necessarily from Greece) – these two gentiles come to the disciples and ask to see Jesus. And they come to Philip, and Philip tells Andrew and together they go to tell Jesus.

And we can imagine that they were probably kind of excited. Things were going well. The Jews were receiving Jesus and seem to be hailing him as their king – to such an extent that in verse 19 the Pharisees observe what is happening and say “Look, the world has gone after him.” And then, as if to confirm the Pharisees’ fear, now two Greeks – two gentiles outside of the nation of Israel – also come and want to see Jesus. After years of work and public ministry, things really seem to be taking off.

And, likely excited by this, Philip and Andrew come before Jesus, they tell him the exciting news, and his response is to talk about how if a grain of wheat is to bear any fruit, it must first die, and then to start speaking of his own death.

His response seems cryptic and morbid. And you could almost imagine the disciples getting frustrated and wanting to say “Oh, come on Jesus ... this is good news! ... Why do you have to be such a Debbie Downer!? Why can’t you just be happy about how things are going?”

We don’t get the disciples’ reply, but it is hard to imagine them not at least thinking this way.

And we often think that way too, don’t we? Maybe as we read the Scriptures. Maybe as we hear this very passage. “Why does Jesus have to be so negative?” we ask. “Why so morbid? Why can’t he cheer up!? Why can’t he be a bit more optimistic and uplifting?” That’s often what we’d like. If you go to the average Christian book store, you’ll find lots of cards and posters, and plaques with Bible verses written on them. But not many with verses like this – not many that say: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” That’s not really what we want to hear. That’s not what we want to hang up in our children’s bedrooms. We’d prefer something a bit more positive.

And we feel that way in many areas of our lives. Our attention is easily grabbed by the promise of modest benefits – modest fruitfulness, modest growth – through straightforward and easy progress.

Our attention is seized by diets or diet products that promise changes to our bodies through a straightforward and easy program.

Our ears perk-up to financial plans, career paths, or investment plans that promise an easy and straightforward path to financial prosperity.

We long for a book, or a system, or a guide to parenting that will make our children obedient in a way that is easy and straightforward for us.

We hope in a new book, in a new bible reading plan, in a new system, that will rejuvenate and invigorate our spiritual lives in an easy and straightforward manner.

And when these things don’t work out we get frustrated, and we remind ourselves that we are not asking for that much. All we want is modest fruitfulness in life, achievable in a relatively easy and straightforward way.

And that's why we can relate to Andrew and Philip in this text. They were probably excited. They were starting to see some fruit in Jesus's ministry. It was going well, it was following a logical, straightforward pattern, and they go to tell Jesus, and he throws them this curve ball. All they wanted was modest fruitfulness in life, achievable in a relatively easy and straightforward way. Why did Jesus have to pour cold water on their hope by starting to talk about death? We can often sympathize with Philip and Andrew.

But our sympathy does not reveal or confirm a problem with Jesus. Instead, as is often the case, it reveals and confirms a problem with us. Because, not surprisingly, Jesus is right.

Jesus's response basically says that Philip and Andrew have lost sight of the scope of God's work, and the way God works in the world. And so, often, do we.

What we see in Jesus's reply is that God has much bigger plans than we imagine, and a much different way of bringing about spiritual fruit than we would devise.

Let me repeat that: God has much bigger plans than we imagine, and a much different way of bringing about spiritual fruit than we would devise.

Let's see how Jesus explains that in our text.

First, Jesus shows us that God has much bigger plans than we imagine. Philip and Andrew are excited with a big reception in Jerusalem and two Greeks seeking Jesus. But Jesus knows that this is just the beginning of something much bigger. This is just a hint of what is to come.

Jesus knows that God has already promised to do much more than this. He knows that in Genesis 12, when God called Abraham he said to him "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." "All the families." These two gentiles are barely a taste of what God is doing. Jesus knows this. He says as much in verse 32 when he says "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Jesus knows the scope of what God has promised. And, of course, he is right.

The Pew Research Center estimates that there are 2.18 billion Christians in the world today.¹ To put that in some context, John D. Durand from the University of Pennsylvania has written that the classic estimates of the population of the entire Roman Empire in the first century range between 46 million and 80 million.²

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

² John D. Durand, "Historical Estimates of World Population: An Evaluation" (Population Studies Center of the University of Pennsylvania, 1974), 29.

Now there is substantial margin for error in all of those numbers, and many of the 2 billion Christians today are only nominal in their faith.

But even so, let's put that in some perspective. If we assume the highest population estimate for the Roman Empire – that there were 80 million people in it in Jesus' day, that means that even if only 4% of today's self-proclaimed Christians are true believers – and that is a pretty pessimistic percentage – but even if only 4% of today's Christians are true believers, then there are still alive today more true followers of Christ than there were human beings living in the entire Roman Empire at the time of Philip and Andrew.

Philip and Andrew had hopes for Christ's kingdom – but they were likely too modest. They looked to two gentiles who wanted to see Christ. Little did they know that the day would come when more people – and an overwhelming number of them gentiles – would follow Christ than lived in the entire Roman Empire of their day.

But Jesus knew. Jesus remembered the promise God made to Abraham, and so he kept his sight on the true scope of God's promise. His expectations far exceeded Andrew's and Philip's.

So first, Jesus shows us that God has much bigger plans than we imagine.

But second, Jesus reminds us that God has a much different way of bringing about spiritual fruit than we would devise. Where we would prefer to achieve things in a relatively easy and straightforward way, Jesus reminds us that God works through death and resurrection. And it is in this way that God brings about spiritual fruit.

Jesus draws this point from the lesson of the grain of wheat. In the grain of wheat, in how God has designed the grain of wheat to work, God has already written a lesson about His kingdom for His people. Jesus explains, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." In the grain of wheat, Jesus sees the pattern for how God normally works.

And from this Jesus teaches his followers about God and about his own ministry. Jesus teaches them that God is a God who works through death and resurrection. And he teaches them that his ministry is to be one of death and resurrection.

The task given to Christ is an immense one. He is to die for God's people. But in addition to that, he is to extend God's people from a small sub-group in Israel to a level that will bless all families of the earth. And Christ knows that in God's economy, something like that does not come about in a straightforward way. Something like that requires death and resurrection. If God is to have a great harvest in this world, if it is to extend, to become a harvest that includes all families of the earth, then like the grain of wheat, Jesus knows he must die to produce that harvest. Jesus knows that God works through death and resurrection, and so he is trying to reframe his disciples' mindset so that they can see what is coming.

In our text Jesus is reframing his ministry in light of that reality – in light of the lesson of the grain of wheat. Andrew and Philip, along with many of us, may prefer to achieve modest

fruitfulness in a relatively easy and straightforward way, but Jesus knows that God is going to bring about abundant fruitfulness, and he will do it through Christ's own death and resurrection.

So, Jesus reframes his ministry in light of the lesson of the grain of wheat. But he also does more here than just reframe his ministry. He reframes our view of God's kingdom. And in the process, he reframes our view of death, and our view of life. And I want to take some time to consider that now: How the lesson of the grain of wheat and its application to the death and resurrection of Christ reframes how we should consider death, and how we should consider life.

I have mentioned before how Rachel and I have experienced the pain and loss of miscarriage more than once. After our last miscarriage we were able to have a burial and a small ceremony, just the two of us, where we buried the very small remains of our child lost in the first trimester.

On the day that we did that, I had the words of a song get stuck in my head. It was, oddly enough, from a Regina Spektor song, and for several days the words sort of hung in my head and rattled around my brain.

The words she sang were this – she sang:
“We keep on burying our dead.
We keep on planting their bones in the ground.
But they won't grow.
The sun doesn't help.
The rain doesn't help.”

I was struck by that image of planting, and by that deep sense of longing after a loved one is placed in the ground to see them “grow.” To see them, like a planted seed, spring to new life.

Regina Spektor is certainly not a Christian, and I would not recommend her music for everyone, to be sure – but in these lines, she is hitting on a Christian image.

Because in First Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul picks up on the image of a grain of wheat, used by Christ in our text, and he applies it to all who die in Christ. To all believers.

First, the Apostle Paul speaks of Christ's resurrection as the “firstfruits,” with the resurrection of Christ's people being the harvest that is to follow. Then he speaks to those who are denying a future bodily resurrection of believers. He says to them, “You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.” Paul goes on, “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.”

The Apostle Paul picks up this image that Jesus uses – that of a grain of wheat that must die to bear abundant fruit - and he points out that Christ has not only done this himself, but he has also forged a path for his people to follow. He has forged a path for all who trust in him.

We don't like to talk about death in our culture. Most of us here don't like to talk about it or think about it. Much of our lives and our culture is built around an attempt at the denial of death. It is built to deny to ourselves over and over again that we are going to die.

But death is real. And we need to reflect on it. And we need to learn the lesson of the grain of wheat. Death is real and it is difficult. It can be difficult even in Christ, and especially for those left behind. It separates that which was never meant to be separated: body from soul, husband from wife, parent from child.

But by it, God will bring an abundant new life for those who die in Christ. Our God works through death and resurrection. And so as the grain of wheat dies and then springs to new life and yields a harvest of fruitfulness, so our death in Christ leads to our resurrection in him at his return – to a fruitful and abundant life we cannot even imagine, where all is made new, where heaven and earth are united, where every tear is wiped away from the eyes of God's people, where we have communion with God, and where all who have died in Christ are reunited. Forever.

What do we do in the meantime? Well, in the words of Regina Spektor, “We keep on burying our dead. We keep on planting their bones in the ground.” That is the pattern of God's people. Just this past week we buried our Elder Emeritus Harry DeSoto. He is not the first and he will not be the last. And when we do bury our dead, we are filled with longing, and even pain, because right now, at this moment, they don't grow. And the sun doesn't help, and the rain doesn't help. But we plant in faith. We plant knowing that in Christ, we look forward to a day when by God's power they will grow. A day when the perishable puts on the imperishable, when the mortal puts on immortality, and when Death is swallowed up in victory.

And so, in the image of the grain of wheat, in his death and resurrection, Christ reframes our death – so long as our death is in Christ.

But he doesn't stop there. He doesn't just reframe our death. He also reframes our life.

I like the writing of Fyodor Dostoevsky. I love his novels *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* as well as some of his shorter novellas that I've read. I also like what I have read of what is supposed to be his greatest work, *The Brothers Karamazov*, but for some reason I have never made it through the whole novel. Instead, I have developed this unintentional pattern of picking up *The Brothers Karamazov* every two years or so, starting at the beginning, reading between two and three hundred pages, and then for some reason, stopping. And then I don't pick it up again for a couple years when I begin the process again. It's embarrassing, and I'm not sure what my hang-up is, but there it is.

Nonetheless, there is a section from *The Brothers Karamazov* that I wanted to share, and thankfully for me, it is within the first 300 pages – so I know about it.

In one early scene the spiritual teacher Elder Zosima is speaking with some women about what it means to love others, and what he calls “active love.” He encourages them to pursue it, but he does not sugar coat things either – he tells them that the path God calls us to is a hard one.

This is what he says – he says:

“I am sorry that I cannot say anything more comforting, for active love is a harsh and fearful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams thirsts for immediate action, quickly performed, and with everyone watching. Indeed, it will go as far as the giving even of one’s life, provided it does not take long but is soon over, as on stage, and everyone is looking on and praising. Whereas active love is labor and perseverance.” (58)

Earlier in the novel, the narrator expresses a similar idea. He is reflecting on the nature of young men in Russia at that time, and their willingness to throw themselves fully behind an idea, and to sacrifice everything for it – even their own lives. And then he says this:

“Unfortunately, these young men do not understand that the sacrifice of life is, perhaps, the easiest of all sacrifices in many cases, while to sacrifice, for example, five or six years of their ebulliently youthful life to hard, difficult studies, to learning, in order to increase tenfold their strength to serve the very truth and the very deed that they loved and set out to accomplish – such sacrifice is quite often almost beyond the strength of many of them.” (26)

What is Dostoevsky getting at here? When we think of sacrifice, when we think of meaningful acts of love, he points out that we often think of grand gestures. We think of a big sacrifice, done all at once, and as if it was on a stage. But rather than that, he wants us to consider that real sacrifice – sacrifice that often bears much fruit, and sacrifice the Bible more often calls us to – is the ongoing sacrifice of ourselves in this life. It is the daily sacrifice of our time, our effort, our emotions, that is profound. It is daily labor and perseverance that makes up active love.

And Christ gives the same indication. While some are called to a dramatic all-at-once sacrifice for the kingdom, Christ points out that most of us are called to the daily sacrifices of ourselves. In our text tonight he says “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me;” In Luke 9 he hits on the same theme and says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

What we see is that, in his death and resurrection, Christ has not only established his kingdom, he has not only forged the path for his people to follow in death, but he has also set a path for us to follow in life. It is a path of death and resurrection. It is a path modeled after the grain of wheat. And it is a path he calls us to in every area of life. We see it everywhere.

We see it, for example, in our marriages. Marriage is complicated, and marriage takes work, and wisdom, and understanding. But when your marriage is stuck, and when your marriage needs to grow, the first thing it needs is NOT usually to work on your communication skills, or to work on your finances, or work on your sex life, or to work on any number of things that could use work. Now don’t get me wrong, those things are all important, and they all usually need work. But they are not the first thing needed, or the most important thing needed. The most important thing needed is for each person to make the choice to die to themselves in order to serve the other. To die to themselves. Only then can abundant fruit begin to grow. Only then can we begin to see real fruit in all those other areas.

We see it in our marriages. We also see it in raising children. I love my children more than I could ever put into words. I love raising them. I really do. But I am only four and a half years into this process and I know enough to know that sometimes parenting feels like death. Sometimes the repetition of it, and the frustration of it, and the mundane nature of it, and the predictable rebellion of their little hearts makes parenting feel like death. I know that, and I've only been at it four and a half years. I know that, and I am not even the one who stays home with the children all day.

Do you know why parenting sometimes feels like death? Because it kind of is. Because when you make lunch for what feels like the millionth time, and when you have to apply discipline for what feels like the millionth time, and when you have to change a diaper for what feels like the millionth time, you are choosing to die to yourself in order to bring about abundant fruit in their lives. And just like real farming, you don't see the fruit right away. It takes a while.

You know, I joked a bit earlier that if you go into the average Christian bookstore you won't find many motivational posters or handcrafted plaques in there with the words "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." But maybe that is what we need. Because that is what our families are supposed to be all about: Each person dying to themselves to serve the other, and the entire family dying to itself to serve Christ.

We see this in our marriages, in our children, and we see it in other areas of life as well.

We see it in our individual spiritual lives. If you want to see growth in your spiritual life, if you want to see sanctification and maturity increase in yourself, the path will rarely be easy or straightforward. It will almost always be through the path that Jesus paved: the path of death and resurrection. The path of dying to ourselves.

We see it in friendships. If you want your friendships to grow and increase in trust and intimacy, it won't usually be by a process that is easy, but by a choice that you make to die to yourself in order to better love your friend.

We see it in churches. Most church-growth books and seminars aside, real, meaningful, and lasting church growth does not happen by getting just the right program implemented just the right way. Programs matter, to be sure. But a church cannot grow in a positive way without the decision to die to ourselves: A decision first of individuals in the church to die to themselves to serve their brothers and sisters in Christ, and a second decision of the church as a whole to die to themselves for the life of the community around them.

Put another way, if you want to see the church grow, it often begins with investing your time in fellow members of the church who could benefit from your friendship, but whom you find it difficult to be around.

Now don't get me wrong – you can see some numerical growth without the lesson of the grain of wheat, even drastic numerical growth. But not growth that matters. Not growth that is significant for God's kingdom. Not growth that yields a harvest for the kingdom of God.

Beyond our marriages, our families, our friendships, and our church, we see the lesson of the grain of wheat play out in our lives out in the world too. What is it you are trying to do out in the world? What has God called you to in your vocation, your relationships, in the various organizations you participate in? Even there you know that fruitful growth and success requires self-sacrifice. Work done well and faithfully requires that we die to ourselves in order to see a fruitful harvest.

And so, in the image of the grain of wheat, in his death and resurrection, Christ reframes our lives. He reframes our lives and our callings in him.

The world around us and our hearts within us clamor for something easier. They clamor for something straightforward. And to that end we are willing even to accept more modest goals in life.

The same mindset existed in Jesus's day too. But he rejected it. He rejected the idea of a modest earthly kingdom gained in an easier and more straightforward way in order to achieve an eternal, and one day world-wide, kingdom attained through his death and resurrection.

And in doing that he forged a new path for us. It is a new path for our death, so that while death is always hard, it is not hopeless. Those who have put their trust in Christ, those who have followed him in this life, will also follow him in death. Planted in the ground like a grain of wheat their bodies await the call of their Lord when he returns, and then they will spring forth in new life for a heavenly harvest.

And Jesus also forged a new path for this life. The lesson of the grain of wheat, the story of the death and resurrection of Christ, now form the paradigm for how we live our lives. We are called to take up our cross and die to ourselves daily. We are called to die to ourselves again and again, in the great and in the mundane, in order to bring about the fruit of the kingdom of God in this world – in our marriages, in our children, in our spiritual lives, in our friendships, in our church, and in our lives out in the world.

That path is not an easy one. We will fail again and again. But thankfully we have a savior who can sympathize with our weaknesses. We have a savior who forgives our sins. We have a savior who leads us on, down the path he has forged, as we seek one step at a time to follow in his footprints.

We trust, by his grace, that we will follow him in our death. Let us then seek to also follow him in our life.

Amen.