

## **A Grain of Wheat**

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John 12:20-33

Psalm 51: 1-12

Jeremiah 31:31-34

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

This agricultural truth is one that we see all around us this time of year. The bulbs that have been buried all winter begin to grow, even flower. This is the season when many of us have good intentions to plant seeds, but other things take priority. Planning ahead for summer produce can be hard when there are more immediate things to take care of; work projects, soccer games, papers to write, taxes to prepare, meals to cook...

We know that in order for there to be fruit, the seeds must be planted. Many of us sprinkle and bury seeds in little pots to start tomatoes, herbs and other plants indoors while the weather outside is still unpredictable. Many of us are loosening the soil outside to ready it for planting. And some of us are just trying to find those seeds we bought with good intentions. Come fall, they will still be in their little envelopes, packets of promise but no fruit.

As difficult as this is with seeds and plants, it is even harder as a metaphor for our lives. We know it is true for caterpillars and tulip bulbs, cicadas and acorns. But for people, how does this really work? Dying in order to find new life, dying in order to bear fruit. Burying something or letting go of something, trusting that it will grow in a new way that is fruitful.

Maybe the difficulty of accepting this truth, the seed in the ground, is why so much energy has been expended the past 2000 years trying to clarify Jesus' death. Jesus' followers have been trying to explain and make sense of this, justifying violence, even inciting violence in an attempt to prove that out of death comes life. As if that isn't hard enough, out of Jesus' death comes eternal life.

Jesus died on a cross; this was a weapon of coercion and capital punishment. The Romans made liberal use of it to scare people into obedience. The curious thing is that for much of the Christian world the cross is now a symbol of reconciliation rather than violence.

Many competing theories have developed about why Jesus died, what it means and how this reconciles us to God. Of course for the first followers of Jesus who were Jewish, he was the sacrificial lamb. Faithful Jews sacrifice a lamb to show sorrow for their sins, to get nearer to God. And so Jesus must be like that, the lamb that was slain to bring us closer to God. As Christians we still use this language today. In the mass every Sunday Catholics sing "O Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us." (HWB 153)

Later, when Christianity was firmly established as something separate from Judaism, other theories developed, depending on the cultural context.

God's honor was in jeopardy and Jesus' death restored God's honor.

Or the world is captive to sin and Jesus' death paid the ransom so that the rest of the world can be freed from this captivity.

Or Jesus' death so moves us emotionally and spiritually that we are compelled to change from our sinful ways.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of understandings of Jesus' death. There are at least a dozen different explanations of how Jesus' death joins us to God in a new way. But which one is right?

In some branches of Christianity, Jesus' death on the cross is the central event on which all else rests. There is no coming to God unless one believes that Jesus died for your sins. As Anabaptists, we focus more on Jesus' life and ministry, although of course we understand Jesus' death and resurrection as vital. We don't eschew his death, but neither do we make it the crux of our faith. He died and rose again. What *does* it mean for us?

For those of us who are peacemakers, who believe that we are to avoid violence, looking to this violent death as salvific, as reconciling, seems incongruent. If we believe that it is not just the final product but the process that is important, then how can eternal life come out of violent death? This is one of the questions that Anabaptist theologians and feminist theologians wrestle with in terms of the atonement. There is no easy answer, although many would have us choose an answer quickly before we succumb to the powers of death from which there is no resurrection.

The metaphor that Jesus shares with the Greek seekers and the others gathered for Passover can be helpful here. There is no violence in planting a seed (unless you are worried about the worms below the ground). The planting of

seed is not demanded for honor. It is not a ransom. It may be inviting, but it is not cruel. The seed is planted and eventually bears fruit.

And yet this is not an easy choice even for Jesus. He wants to stay true to what he knows, to follow the prophets and law in the way that he understands them to point to God but he struggles. He wonders hypothetically, “should I go ahead when it looks like it may lead to death, or should I ask to be saved from this?” He answers his own question, “no, I must continue on this path.” And before he can finish fully, a voice comes from heaven affirming his choice.

In John’s gospel there is no voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism affirming him as the beloved child. The writer of John has no mountain top transfiguration with a voice from heaven calling Jesus the chosen one. Instead there is this scene, with the inquiring Greeks and the disciples and Jesus wondering aloud whether it is all worth it. The voice from heaven answers, “This will bring glory to God; in fact it already has brought glory to God.” And with that affirmation, which the people hear as thunder or angel voices, Jesus continues his teaching.

But what about death that does not lead to life? What if the plant grows but the fruit is rotten. I imagine that so-called suicide bombers believe that some good will come out of their actions. Like wise, I wonder if people in the military think that by making the “ultimate sacrifice” they are bringing something good to their country. How do we judge a death immediately after the seed is planted? How do we know what kind of fruit it will bear? Must we rely only on history? When is death just death and when is death bringing new life? I am not sure we ever really know at the moment of planting.

The most immediate example for me is quite personal. Ten years ago my mother died, not a violent death but a common death from cancer. I was devastated nonetheless. At 62, she still had a lot to offer the world, and she would never get to see her grandchildren grow-up.

My grief was heavy and miserable the first few months. I did the best I could, carrying on in life, working and being mother to my two young children, but life was an angry blur. After a while I was able to cry, to get into therapy, to try and understand what this death meant for me. It took a few more deaths in the family before I could see that perhaps there could be new life. I don't recommend actual death as fertilizer for growth, but in my experience it can be that.

As a college student I met a therapist who said she was grateful for her own mother's death when she was a girl of 19. She reasoned that it opened up the world for her in a way that would not have been possible had her mother lived. It seemed a cruel and harsh assessment at the time. But now, 10 years after my own mother's death, I have some sense of what she was saying. I still miss my mother. I often wish she were here to share her wisdom with me. But I do understand that certain fruit has grown in the field from her death.

A grain of wheat buried in the ground can bear much fruit, can produce a rich harvest. But just because this is true does not mean that we want to inflict death on other people, or on ourselves. Looking back we can see that death has the power to make us one with the one who died, to make us one with God. But in the moment of death we don't usually understand it that way.

I am not sure the disciples understood Jesus' death as a seed of hope as they watched the gruesome event. But written at least 60 years after the fact, the gospel of John shows us that Jesus' death and resurrection did bear fruit. Two or three generations after his death Jesus' teachings were solidified into this story of his wisdom and passion. The seeds were planted and the fruit was coming ripe: communities throughout the region were following the Jesus' way; communities were breaking bread and sharing life together as they followed his teachings. The fruit did not grow instantaneously; it took a while — like the seed in the ground.

Some of us, of a certain age, have fairly extensive experience with alter calls. We were taught to look into the future with fear, to see the hell that awaited us unless we chose the cross. We were asked to raise our hands and pledge to follow Jesus to death.

This morning I want to try a different kind of alter call. Relax. No hand raising, no coming forward. Slow your breathing.

Instead of looking forward with fear, I invite you to look back on your life, with gratitude. What are those small deaths, or maybe large deaths, that in hindsight you see may have been seeds falling into the ground? What are those situations that were so devastating they felt like the end? Looking back, has there been any growth? From where you stand now, does that difficulty look at all like a seed, grown into a plant that bears fruit? Here is the hard part; can you give thanks? Turning your attention from your own pain to what the gardener has done with that seed — can you give thanks? For the seed? For the growth? For the fruit?

Lent is an excuse each year to take stock of our lives. It is the reminder to check in with ourselves, to see what growth has happened and take intentional steps toward new growth. Spring is nice but spiritually we can plant a seed (or a seed may be planted despite us) in any season. We may see the fruit soon in our lives or it may take a while for the plant to grow and the fruit to ripen. It may be a resurrection in three days or a gospel in the making over 60 years.

As we plant and tend the seeds, take up the cross, serve and follow, may God be glorified. Thanks be to God.