

## Choose Death?

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John 12:21-33  
Psalm 51

New life is all around us this spring; everything is glorious green, pink, yellow, purple, orange. Budding trees and flowers, bees and birds, aromatic pollen.

Yet my friends who are therapists tell me this is also the season that people get depressed. Seeing new life on the outside only serves as reminder of the same old, dark, existence on the inside. Just as some people experience depression at Christmas, it can hard to be cheerful in the spring when it seems like the whole world is blooming with joy.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons I find this text from John 12 especially jarring this week. Things are growing green, life is all around and we have Jesus saying that unless you are willing to die you have no life.

And there is death all around:

- shootings in France this past week;
- the massacre in Afghanistan by the U.S. soldier who had too much war;
- ongoing mass destruction and death ordered by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad;
- even in **The Hunger Games**, a popular book and now movie, that features a futuristic government that controls society by forcing young people to hunt and kill each other.

Death comes at us in endless wars and conflicts, auto accidents, murders, cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer's. We can rage about death, pray about death, but like life, it just keeps coming.

We are told in the law, in Deuteronomy 30, that we are to "choose life." We do choose life; we choose to live as faithful followers of Jesus.

And then we read that Jesus says in John that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it has no life; it bears no fruit.

Let's set the scene: The religious authorities have been watching and interacting with this man Jesus. They are not keen on the fact that Jesus is getting all the attention, that people are turning toward this new rabbi's teaching and not the traditional ways. Enough is enough. They agree that Jesus should be arrested and killed. Passover is approaching and they don't need the kind of trouble this guy inevitably stirs up. Better to have Rome lock him up and take care of him.

Jesus goes to the home of his good friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. On a previous visit, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. On this visit, Jesus is welcomed by Mary who pours expensive perfume on his feet and then wipes it dry with her hair! Of course this causes a protest. Judas complains that she is wasting precious resources that could be used to help "the poor." We know that Jesus and his disciples, itinerant preachers all, are not rich. Is Judas thinking only of himself here? Before Judas gets too far Jesus stops this whole line of reasoning by saying that Mary is preparing his body for burial.

Meanwhile the local people hear that Jesus and company are at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus so they gather outside. They not only want to see Jesus but Lazarus too since word has traveled that he was dead but is now alive.

The news reaches the religious leaders as well. Their plans to kill Jesus intensify and they add Lazarus to the list since his death and resurrection have now become part of the problem.

Yet life goes on. The next day Jesus enters Jerusalem for the Passover and a crowd greets him with shouting and singing. "Hosanna, hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God."

This Passover festival is quite the event. Even some Greeks have come to worship. They are not in town to see the religious authorities as one might imagine; they want to see Jesus.

The outsider Greeks ask Phillip, a visitor to Jerusalem, if they can see Jesus. Phillip, thrilled with the new attention and respect accorded him by the Greeks, tells Andrew about the Greeks. They go together to tell Jesus of these inquirers. It is to this crowd of disciples and Greeks alike that he speaks of the seed that must fall into the ground, that must die in order to bring life.

When we speak of death this week, I cannot help but think of Trayvon Martin, the teenager who was shot and killed last month in Florida, walking to a family friend's house in a gated community. As Marian Wright Edelman writes: "the main thing he was doing that made him look 'no good' was wearing a hooded sweatshirt in the rain and walking while black."<sup>1</sup> Trayvon's tragic death has angered and mobilized people around

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/walking-while-black\\_b\\_1371428.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/walking-while-black_b_1371428.html)

the country, indeed around the world. His death was unjust, untimely and unnecessary. And though his killer walks free, I can't imagine that George Zimmerman and his family sleep well at night.

We may feel like Enuma Okoro who writes this on the Sojourner's blog:<sup>2</sup>  
*...I cannot find my words, appropriate words, enough words, redeeming words, resurrecting words. I cannot find any words that could breathe any modicum of life into the death of this child. I listen to and welcome the words of others, of anger and the clarion calls for justice. I listen and I receive them because they are justified. But all I am able to speak to at this point is of deep sadness and burrowing sorrow. For now.*

How do we even begin to search for the words that might bring resurrection, that might give a glimmer of hope?

Let us be bold, can we be bold, as we hope and pray for change.

Let us pray that the outrage might be turned into efforts to change gun laws; that fear might turn to compassion and respect for young black men who walk down the street; that suspicion of unknown neighbors might be turned to friendship and block parties; that healing will come for Trayvon's family, friends and community and for the many other families in this country that unfortunately experience situations all too similar to this one.

Can we be bold enough as a country and as individuals to pray that all of us will begin to examine, resist and change the racist tendencies in ourselves and our institutions?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://sojo.net/blogs/2012/03/22/when-you-cant-find-your-words#.T2zzecNZlvo.facebook>

Jesus says “Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies it yields a rich harvest.” To quote this text and its series of metaphors into this situation adds only to the injustice. It would be an unholy burden to suggest at this point that young Trayvon is a seed, that his violent death is somehow justified because it may bear fruit.

Though Jesus speaks of the grain of wheat dying and yielding a rich harvest, he is not eager to embrace death. His soul is troubled; he wonders if he should ask to be “saved from this hour.” Can he avoid suffering? Can this death be taken from him? The Johanine community that carefully tells this story 60 years after the fact seems to see this as the culmination of his ministry. As they look back they see God in the tragedy. But one wonders if, at that moment, Jesus was so convinced himself.

Perhaps a less physically violent story tracks closer to this image of the seed falling into the ground. Seven years ago this month, we presented our “case” to the Allegheny Mennonite Conference. It felt like a terminal diagnosis when the delegates voted that our membership practice of inviting all faithful followers of Jesus to be members of the congregation is inconsistent with the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA on issues of sexuality. We experienced the stages of grief. We cried, we were angry, we were in denial. In the ensuing months we definitely bargained.

Eight months later the conference delegates spoke again. This time they voted to discipline our congregation by taking away our vote and our eligibility for elected office. When that vote was announced, it felt like a death.

We were not sure what would come next. And then we died to the idea of being leaders in the conference. We died to the idea of sharing our gifts through traditional channels with the larger church. But we did not die to the idea that we are followers of Jesus. As Jesus says, “Anyone who wants to work for me must follow in my footsteps and wherever I am, my worker will be there too.”

During these seven years, we have seen the fruit that comes with a planted seed. We have deepened our spirituality and sense of community. I have heard youth excited about what they are learning about the Bible. I have lost track of how many new members we have welcomed, but it is over 60. We have expanded our understanding of hospitality and will soon break ground on the renovations to add the elevator to the building. I am sure you can name other fruit that you see growing and flourishing among us.

Our commitment to follow Jesus is bearing fruit outside the congregation as well. This coming Saturday, the conference leadership council will recommend to the delegates that the conference explore reconciliation with our congregation. While this is hopeful news, we do not know exactly what this will mean. Reconciliation in this situation has not yet been defined. What we do know is that we will continue to be faithful. We will continue to live out love for each other and for the world. We will continue to speak the truth in love and follow in Jesus’ footsteps.

The opportunities to plant seeds, to let a part of us die so that it can grow and bear new fruit, are all around us. As our congregation is graciously hosted in this building for the next seven months, we will have new opportunities to live into this metaphor. We may need to let die our preferences for worship time. We may need to let

die our idea of the perfect worship space. We may need to let die the idea that a certain order of worship or way of singing is essential to our life together.

As we let go and drop those seeds into the ground, let us remember that we are still on the journey together. Let us remember that we are still following in Jesus' footsteps, still faithful to the covenant to which we are called. And God in turn remembers us, holding us all in love so that the seeds that fall into the ground will bear fruit, much fruit.