

21.03.21 SERMON:

John 12:20-26

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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 honour.

It may be 35 degrees outside on this morning that I'm writing my sermon, with sleet threatening to fall, but today, in my house, spring unofficially began. You see, today I pulled out my tomato seeds and took that radical leap of faith, and pushed them into the earth. Tucked them in, pressed the soil firmly around them, watered them well, turned on the heat pad, and left them to do the work of transformation. These seeds that look dead, I know, I trust, that they have life stored inside, just waiting to bust out of those hard shells and create something new. I hold onto the hope that when summer days turn long, hot and sticky, I will be feasting on big, ripe, juicy tomatoes.

As I've lovingly, carefully and with a full measure of hope and faith, let my precious tomato seeds; these that I saved from last year's tomatoes, fall into the earth - I've been pondering our gospel passage this morning.

We're here, in the 12th chapter of John's gospel this week - where, in John's telling, this story takes place after J's triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, with crowds shouting Hosanna, waving palm branches - crowds so large that the Pharisees grumble to one another - "look! The world has gone after him!"

It's here, after the festival, that our story picks up. Where, in response to the request to meet with the Greeks - these gentiles, foreigners, outsiders, that Jesus answered, 'The hour has come... the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, he goes on - 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.'

It's here, finally, as the gentiles request to see him, that J proclaims 'the hour has come for the son of Man to be glorified'. It is time, folks. No more waiting - no more saying 'my time has not come' - as John's J tells his mother at the wedding of Cana, in chapter 2 of this gospel, or later, in chapter 7, where J tells his disciples to go without him to the festival of booths - 'my time has not yet come' he declared.

But here we are, 5 chapters later, J rode into the city to cheering crowds, and he says, finally, 'the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.' He goes on, with these shocking words -

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and is buried in the ground, unless it's dead to the world, it's never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it's buried, if it's broken open, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, he says,

anyone who holds onto life, just as it is, (kind of like remaining forever dormant as a single seed, that life is destroyed. But if you let your life go, reckless in your love, opening up, cracking open, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

“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.”

What does it mean for a seed to fall and die, in order to bring forth new life?

Technically, according to my botanist friends, viable seeds don't really die - even though they look dead.

So what is needed for this seed (tomato seed) to transform into...this? (picture of a tomato)

Seeds are incredible little packages of life. They come in all shapes and sizes - some, like the seeds from these orchids¹ (insert picture) are so small they can't be seen by the human eye. Others, like this Coco de Mer seed², can weigh nearly 40 pounds, about the same as a medium-sized dog!

Yes, life, in the form of seeds, shows up in endless shapes and sizes. But to go from these dead looking seeds, into new life, something has to happen.

¹

<https://diogenesii.wordpress.com/2007/06/22/what-is-the-smallest-seed-in-the-world/>

² [The secret of the world's largest seed revealed](#)

A seed can remain dormant, just as a single seed, for months, years, thousands of years, waiting for the right conditions to germinate. Alpine lupine seeds were excavated from a lemming burrow in frozen Arctic tundra, germinating and flowering after an estimated 10,000 years of dormancy! That is self-preservation, isn't it?

Remaining dormant is about staying alive until the conditions are right. Water, temperature, just the right amount of sunlight for some, darkness for others - that's what seeds need to begin the perilous journey of transformation and new life.

Seeds vary, but for most, the protective seed coat, or shell, needs to be stressed enough, stressed in some way that allows moisture to make its way into the embryo, where life wakes up.

Where J speaks of the seed dying, I think of the seed being broken open. Where, over time, stress has worn down that protective covering - broken it open enough for the things of life to make their way in.

Then germination begins, and as the embryo enlarges, the seed coat breaks open, first sending roots down, down into the earth, and then the shoot, containing leaf and stem, emerges. (use beginning part of [this video here](#))

The seed is no longer safely contained, dormant, a single seed, waiting. No, this being cracked open, dying in a sense, begins the fragile work of growth and new life.

And so it is with us. What about our lives?

Are we people intent on self-preservation, staying small, safe, as seeds - wrapped in our hard shells?

What are we to do when we hear J's invitation to die - to be broken open, for new life to come forth?

The way this passage is framed in John gives us a handle on J's radical insistence that dying must become part of our lives if our faith is going to mean anything. J speaks these hardest, most unrelenting words about following him, when the disciples, the ones who had definite ideas about who he was, were faced with some unclean gentiles making a request to see J. J knew that their old way of thinking about their lives had to die. Their sure understanding of God, the one they knew by heart and never dared to question... had to die,

their convictions of what role they would play in this kingdom J kept talking about... had to die.

Their preconceived ideas about people who were different... had to die; had to be broken open.

Their old ideas about religion, gender, social class;

their notions about enemies, and material wealth and what they thought for sure they needed to survive... it all needed to die,

It all needed to die in order for what God wanted to create in them to be born.

What are the things in you and me that must die, must be cracked wide open? If we're really serious about following this radical J, what in us must make room for new life?

J's invitation to the crowds that day are the same that he offers us - come and die.

What ideas, what ways of being are limiting your view of what God dreams for you and for this world?

Take a hard look and start where you are. I imagine J might have said, "turn to the Greeks standing next to you, and die to your old prejudices that keep you from community."

“Look over there to the temple, that symbol of religious institution that has lost its way and now is in the business of excluding those who don't belong, and die to the notions of what limits God's love.”

Think for a minute about God and everything you know God to be, and die to the compulsion of putting God neatly in a box of your own making.

I think that J knew that if the crowd could step out in faith and start dying, in these little ways, then, like a seed that falls into the ground and breaks open, the potential for new life multiples beyond what we ever imagined. One little death after another, we make room for God's new creation in us.

And then, if the day ever comes that we are asked to hand over our very lives, then we will be people who know with deep conviction what it is we believe. For when we know what it is we will truly die for, then we become people who can more fully live into a life that's full of seed after seed of kingdom living. Kingdom living that has the power, little by little, to change the world.

As we prepare to move into this week, with J heading toward Palm Sunday, what are things that surround you - ideas, or convictions or attitudes, that need to die?³

What does it mean to follow J, wanting to be a follower so desperately, that I, that you, are willing to be cracked open?

What needs to die today?

(end with Mike Bratt's "I have decided to follow Jesus")

