

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 32

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

The Grain That Bears Fruit

Though in many parts of the country it feels like spring is not winning the battle over winter, I still am aware of many people who have been pouring over seed catalogues, have ordered their seeds, and may be starting some seedlings. Green houses started their plantings some week ago in anticipation of the season to come. And farmers have the seed or are getting the seed purchased and ready for spring seeding. So, this is an interesting time of year to also hear the reading from the Gospel of John in which Jesus says, "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."¹(12:24)

Now, I would say most of you have an understanding of this process, but let's just take a moment to think about that grain of wheat. That seed is, for all intent and purposes, dead when just sitting in storage, and yet, put that seed in the ground there is a chance at it coming to life, producing a plant, and bringing a harvest. And if you have ever seen a golden, ripened field of wheat swaying in the wind, you know that is a beautiful sight. But to get to that point, there has to have been good soil, the right amount of rain and sun. This growing does not happen on its own the most important pieces are the soil, water, and sun, but often fertilizer has also been applied to help make the grain more bountiful.

Now with all metaphors there are limitations to how far one can go, but let's take a look at how Jesus may have meant for us to hear these words remembering there are always layers. It can be helpful to recall that we are looking at the Gospel of John which in John 1 verse 14 we hear the words, "and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

When we hear about the cross it can be difficult to get our minds wrapped around the abuse, the torture, and that it may feel like as Jesus prayed, his prayers were unanswered. In Hebrews chapter 5 we read, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save

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him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” (vs7-8).

To speak to this in some helpful way, it is important to remember that Jesus’ body was flesh. He was as human as you and I, so suffering and death were real. The pain of the cross was real. However, Jesus was also fully divine, so it was not like God was sacrificing God’s child in the same manner that we as humans have children. Jesus was the Word and the Word was made flesh. In other words, Jesus was divine, also God, and so it is more like God offered and offers God’s self in Jesus’ death. Hebrews continues in chapter 5 verse 9 to say, “and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” This mysterious priest is connected to Old Testament scripture (Genesis 14:18–20) and points to an order of priesthood that is not earthly line of priests.

Getting back to the grain of wheat. You will note that the seed is transformed, given new life as it is nurtured and grows. The seed becomes something different. Again, not to take the imagery further than intended, that seed can represent at least two things for our understanding, one is that Jesus’ own body was transformed through his death, resurrection, and ascension. He died in an earthly sense, but through the power that is God, his body was transformed. This is a promise for us as well in our own death. But there is more to this for us our living, right now.

This promise of new life coming from a seed, is the promise of new and transformed lives right now, in our time, in this life, where through Christ we can live out the gospel truth that we are loved, forgiven, valuable image bearers of God. We can, in this moment, live grace filled lives where love and justice meet.

I also want to point out the context of Jesus words. “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.” (John 5:20-22).

All that Jesus had spoken was in answer to and in the presence of not just the disciples or those who were Jewish, but it was said with outsiders there. And Jesus didn’t qualify his words by saying this is for these people and not for you. His message was for everyone. Remember John 3:16...for God so loved the world. This is not a message or promise for just a certain group of people. It was not just for the Jews and it is not just for Christians. If Jesus were here among us now, this message would be for anyone in earshot and beyond. Jesus came for the world. This is truly good news.

Going a little further into these readings, you will note that suffering is not taken from Jesus. Submission and obedience are words that come up and sound both archaic and just plain wrong in a world where dominance and power like to put us all in our places. But in Christ, in God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the power of the cross, all of these things are flipped. Power becomes love, forgiveness, and grace. It is about

justice for the truly oppressed. It is power for those who have no power over their circumstances for sure, but also for those who have little power over their health and well-being, little power in their relationships.

All of this is understood in light of the grace and will of a loving God. Not some vengeful God who needs appeasing. But God does need to be respected, loved, and considered in our lives and decisions. And even here God does the work of helping instill in us words of life. In the reading from Jeremiah, the words are written as spoken by God of covenants, promises between God and God's people.

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord", for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

God's deepest desire is to be in relationship with each and everyone of us in a way that we know how deeply loved we are. Still, in relationships there is the choice of rejection. And know that God does not reject us. Throughout the scripture God keeps coming back to people, finding new ways to show God's love, provision, and grace for people, for us. In Jesus that love found its fullness for us and in us. Jesus is that new covenant written on our hearts. Jesus is the promise of transformed and new life now and in a time to come.

It is strange for us to imagine, but it is the way of Christ and of a transformed life seems to be summed up with loss equals gain and surrender equals strength. As Ron Rienstra writes, "...trust that God is not finished with what looks spent. [We are] to believe that God, in resurrection power, can coax life out of what has been buried, hope out of what has been handed over. There is a cost; but in time there is also a harvest."

Our lives are intended to be like grains of wheat that bear good fruit. Lives that are transformed, meaningful and purposeful. Not without challenges, but certainly lived trusting, knowing in our depths, that we are valuable and worthy of love and able to share love, compassion, and grace with others. We are one grain of wheat come to life, but look around there is a church not just this church, but a plethora of churches filled with people also bearing fruit and a world in need of love and transformation. A world where each person is to know that deep within them is the seed, the image of God. May we nourish one another and the world so that what is reaped is a bountiful harvest of compassion, grace, and above all, love. Amen.