

Reflection for Lent V Year B

John 12:20-33

Sunday, March 17th, 2024

A Grain of Wheat: Dying to Live

As I usually do when I share my thoughts on our Gospel passage, I like to begin with an illustration.

Back in 1947 the Betty Crocker Company first began selling their cake mixes which only needed the addition of water during preparation. After baking in the oven, a perfect and delicious cake was made.

But it bombed. No one bought it. According to urban legend, the company couldn't understand why, so they commissioned a study which brought back a surprising answer. It seemed that people weren't buying the cake mix because it was too easy.

They didn't want to be totally excluded from the work of preparing a cake; they wanted to feel that they were contributing something to it.

And what did the Betty Crocker company do? They changed the formula. Now the customer had to add an egg in addition to water. Immediately, the new cake mix was a huge success. Unfortunately, many people make the same mistake when it comes to "packaging" the Christian religion. They try to make the call of Jesus Christ as easy as possible because they're afraid people won't "buy it" if it seems too hard.

Jesus said, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it bears much fruit. He then explained what he meant: "The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it." (from *Stories for Sermons*, kayala.com)

It's true in life isn't it? If we are going to get anything out of it we have to invest ourselves in it, and at the centre is this saying about the seed, and the paradox of dying to live.

Consider this quote: "Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live." (Morrie Schwartz, *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, A Young Man and Life's Greatest Lessons* by Mitch Albom, 1997)

This is one of many wisdom sayings in Mitch Albom's book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a memoir of conversations between a retired sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz, and his former student, the author. Morrie is dying from ALS ~ many of us know it as Lou Gehrig's Disease ~ and during a series of Tuesday visits, they discuss all facets of life ~ their last thesis together.

I've thought a lot about Prof. Morrie's quote. Some people may think it's morbid to ponder death, but, on the other hand, it could be looked upon as a wiser way to look at life. I don't want to think about death any more than anyone else. But, it's a part of life we must accept.

How do you live your life to the fullest, with gratefulness, appreciation for those you love, value the tiny moments you're present in, and pursue your true meaning and purpose in life if you don't have an idea of what you want your life to look like?

How do you want those you love the most to see you?

What impact do you want to make on your friends, family, and those around 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."

- John 12: 24



Fifth Sunday in Lent

It's possible to live the life we choose by our actions each day ~ despite what the world around us may try and convince us. (from "Why You Must Learn How To Die Before You Can Truly Live" by Chase Arbeiter, 2021, medium.com)

"Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

It's not just about Jesus' death and resurrection. It's about being willing to follow Jesus along the road to Jerusalem, into death and resurrection. What's true for him is true for everyone. We can't move by standing still. We can't grow by remaining the same. We can't be great by playing it safe.

"We wish to see Jesus," said the Greeks. (v21)

In John's Gospel "seeing" is code for understanding, for illumination.

There are many who wish to see Jesus. Rev. James Laurence says that this very quote is one that is often written on church pulpits, not for the congregation to see, but for the preacher, to remind us of why we come to worship. We all wish to see Jesus. (My Sermon on John 12:20-33 by Rev. James E. Laurence, March 20, 2021, mypastoralponderings.com)

You've probably "seen" Jesus at least one time in your life.

I did fifteen years ago. Confronting addiction, reclaiming my self-esteem and my family's respect bore much fruit. It was one of those times when I was the grain of wheat that fell into the earth and died and was given a new and abundant life.

And I was absolutely convinced that God was present and working in my life.

Seeing Jesus isn't to be watched from the sidelines. Seeing Jesus is to become totally involved and committed to following Him. It's a matter of having the right attitude, the right heart, and a mind fixed on Jesus. That's where we see him.



But many Christians have limited sight.

They want to see Jesus on their terms. So much of what they want to do for God they try to do by themselves; in other words, they are not completely plugged into following Jesus.

"Not completely plugged in"

A preacher named King Duncan in his *Collected Sermons* shares this insight:

"Remember Gracie Allen, who played the scatterbrained wife in a comedy team with her husband George Burns? Once, Gracie called in a repairman to fix her electric clock. The repairman fiddled with it for a while and then said, "There's nothing wrong with the clock; you didn't have it plugged in." Gracie replied, "I don't want to waste electricity, so I only plug it in when I want to know what time it is." (adapted from "Lay It Down In Order to Rise Up" by Rev R.K. Poos, pg. 6, March 18, 2018, bvcucc.org)

That's an apt description of many. They save religion for a rainy day or just on Sundays.

They go about unplugged and wonder why their lives are so devoid of power...Christian faith is not something to be plugged in when it is convenient or when it is necessary.

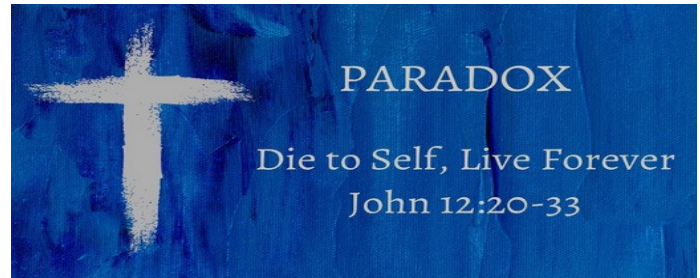
The Christian life is lived daily, and there is a cost involved.

Episcopal priest Michael K. Marsh delves further into this cost: It "will be unveiled every day during Holy Week. I think that's why we hear this text today, a week before Palm Sunday. It's our preparation for Holy Week.

And you know where Holy Week ends, right? At Easter, the empty tomb, the dawn of a new day, and the renewal of life.

The single grain has become the Bread of Life. (The Secret To Life – A Sermon On John 12:20-33, March 19, 2018, © Michael K. Marsh and Interrupting the Silence, 2009-2024, all rights reserved.)

To become the people God calls us to be, to live our lives in the joy of God's love, begins by our "dying" to our doubts and fears, and "dying" to our self-centred wants and needs.



How have you faced your Lenten journey? With creative cake-baking, plugging in the electricity just when you need it?
Or staying connected?

Keep your life and you will lose it. Hate your life in this world, and you shall keep it forever. If we are to follow Jesus, we need to go where he goes.

Amen