

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE SEED

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Richard Spalding
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-28a

“Now among those who went up to worship at the [Passover] 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 a single grain, alone; 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 honor. Now my soul is troubled, And what should I say—Father, save me from this hour? No it is for this reason that have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’”

This is a sermon about what happens to the seed.

Jesus said that “unless it falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.” A solitary seed, a single grain left on a shelf in the shed, swept into a crack between the boards of the floor and forgotten... So many things can happen to a seed—or not happen. If it sits somewhere, inert, untouched, preserved, it still exists, it stays itself but nothing happens. By only existing, it misses its life.

A few years after the time of Jesus, in a fortress called Masada on the western shore of the Dead Sea, a group of Jewish rebels took their last stand against the Roman army and were annihilated. A few years ago, in the ruins of that place, archaeologists found date pits. Presumably somebody had eaten the fruit sometime before the final siege, then tossed the seeds into a crevice, a basket, somewhere dry and empty and forgotten. The seeds remained alone, inert, for about 2,000 years—until the archaeologists found them a few years ago and tried planting one because—well, why not? As of the last news story I could find about it, that seed was growing into a healthy date palm sapling. They’ll still have to be patient, though: The thing about date palms is they take more than a human lifetime to mature to the point of bearing fruit. So it is said that planting dates is an act of love for the future—because you will never meet those who will be fed by your radical little act of horticulture.

But what happens to the seed when it sits undisturbed, by itself? It remains alone.

This is a sermon about the hour.

The disciples Philip and Andrew remembered later that, when they went to tell Jesus that there were some Greeks at the Passover festival who had come a long way and wanted to see him, Jesus had responded by saying, “the hour has come.” That’s an odd way to respond to the news that someone has come to see you; no wonder they remembered it. Those Greeks were probably some of the people who were known then as “God-fearers”, people from somewhere else who were drawn to the message and practice of a religion that was trying to turn the world in a new direction: the direction of justice and mercy, the direction of love of neighbor, the direction of God’s active desire for the course of history. That those Greeks had traveled all the way to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover meant that they were looking for something, perhaps longing for something—and their attentiveness was a sign of the times for Jesus, the man of the hour. They said they wished to see him, and so it was clear that the word was out about this itinerant rabbi: They’d heard about the healings, the feedings, the blessings, and knew that something important was afoot, that time was ripe, that a corner was being turned. “We wish to see Jesus,” they said with their accents from away—and Jesus felt the world turn. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” he said back. There’s no keeping this under wraps any more. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel. The seed finds its way to the soil. The time had come.

This is a sermon about costs.

What Jesus said happens to the seed, the tiny grain, when its hour has come, when the time is right, ready, is that it dies. That’s what he had been saying would happen to him too, when the time came and now here it was, and though he had been saying it pretty much from the beginning, eventually Philip and Andrew and the others would remember that it was when even Greeks came asking for him that he realized that the hour was finally at hand, and what it would cost began to become apparent to them. He had begun by calling the world to turn away from darkness, toward the Light. Now the turning was starting to break out in the open and it was going to get the attention of people who used power to cover their fear of what they had to lose if God started winning—people who thought nothing of wielding death to protect their power.

It was when the Greeks came wanting to see the source of the turning they were hearing about and feeling that Jesus knew that the hour was at hand, that the seed had fallen into the good soil of time and was going soon to do what a seed does, which is to give itself away in order to become what it can become. And they could all see the cost of what had to happen now register on his face, hear it in the timbre of his voice and later they’d remember that it was the day the Greeks came asking to see him that he seemed to feel the cost, and said, “Now my soul is troubled.” They’d never be able to forget that he wondered that day whether he could dare to pray for the cup to pass him by and they even wrote it down. They’d remember that he, who prayed so freely, and taught them to pray, always with confidence, *Our Father in heaven, holy is your name;* he, now, at least for a moment, was wondering if there was any other way for God’s will to be done, any way for the seed to grow without giving itself away. Any way for the hour to be fulfilled short of pouring out everything.

This is a sermon about not being alone.

Whatever fear Jesus may have felt in contemplating the falling of the seed into the ground, still somehow he found it in himself to say, “No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” and they heard that and wrote it down, too. If he had stopped short of the fear, if he had turned away from the glaring finitude every one of us faces, and taken a pass on the danger that always lurks in this world as long as there are people who wield violence to cover their fear, as long as there are people who think the only way to fight

death is with more death, if he had not followed us into the valley of those fearful shadows, then he wouldn't be here for us to follow him through them. The lesson of this costly hour is that there is no way to practice accompaniment remotely. "Compassion" means not being alone; it means "enduring with". Truly I tell you, the grain does not remain alone. What God did, and does, in Jesus, is climb into the midst of what we suffer so as to be beside us in our costliest moments—to teach us not to close ourselves against the hurt of life but to live, with him, right through it.

"Behold, the days are surely coming", says the Lord [through the voice of the prophet Jeremiah], "when I will make a new covenant with my people . . . I will write my law within them, and I will inscribe it upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . And they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them."

What happens to the seed? The tiny vessel wrapped tightly in its impervious case contains on its heart the writing that God has inscribed there: the covenant of God's law, which is justice, and God's nature, which is love, and God habit, which is compassion, inside the seed like its infinitesimal code of DNA. The seed contains the truth, and it has to be planted, to fall into the ground and be utterly opened, given away even, in order to bear its fruit.

This is a sermon about eternal life.

(And this part of it is pretty short because in all honestly I don't really have any way of knowing very much about the particulars of eternal life.)

What I know is that Jesus said, "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." Now it's in this very same gospel of John that Jesus says, "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10) so when Jesus speaks of "those who hate their life in this world" I don't think he quite means hate the way we use it as a synonym for detest or denigrate or denounce. I think he means that, if you pay attention, you'll notice that there are two ways of holding the life you contain: this way [clenched fist] and this way [open palm]. What looks like loving is really holding it back, withholding it, being unwilling to let it fly; loving it to the point of shriveling your choices so as to keep the gift to yourself. But—what happens to the seed? If it only just exists by itself, it loses its life. And, on the other hand, what looks like hating is really just spending it freely, understanding that it's not so much your possession as it is the essential gift you have to give.

On the day the Greeks came wanting to see for themselves what that kind of living looked like, Jesus knew that the hour was at hand for the seed [clenched fist] to fall into the ground [open palm]. I don't know how to guess how much Jesus himself knew about the particulars of eternal life. But, really, you only have to know one thing, if you know the part of God that those Greeks could see in Jesus, and that is that he said that he'd lead the way to it, that he would not leave us alone, and he said it with his life wide open, and then planted himself, the seed, so that everything could change.

My friends, there are signs that change is in the works, signs that the world is turning and this is a time of longing, and of looking with fresh eyes. There are signs that the hour is ripe, and though it seems that the cost is great, and the way ahead fearful, we are not alone in it, not alone in this time because, in the strong

company of Jesus, God is with us in the work that is our work, the time that is our time. We don't choose our work, we do the work that falls to us to do when it's our turn. And there are signs of turning now: the sound of voices long silenced, the standing for things: for the earth, for each other, for our sisters and brothers who have suffered unjustly for so long, whose lives matter. The time is ripe for calling out lies for what they are, and standing up for the future, for wielding compassion instead of fear—standing that all may have life, and have it abundantly. Was there ever a clearer sign of the ripeness of time than this: that, maybe for the first time in all of history, *the whole world*, every single citizen, is facing a common danger, from which none of us is exempt, to which we are all vulnerable, in which we all need each other's help? And what else does love for the future look like, what else does renewed hope look like, than letting the seed we hold fall into the ground to bear the fruit that will feed those whom we will never meet? What else does awakened hope look like than this [open palm]? It's not just an idea any more, it's a way of acting. The hour is ripe for giving ourselves away in order to become what we were meant to become. Good to think about *awakening* hope, yes, but now it needs to *get up out of bed* and get planted.

This is a sermon about what happens to the seed.

This is a church about what happens to the seed, when, however much time the seed may have spent in the dry darkness, alone, it touches down at last in the rich matrix of time—the right time, the ripe time—where it's warmed by hope and watered by forgiveness and kissed by a peace that passes all understanding and will not remain alone any more. This is a church that's leaning forward to find out what happens to the seed that contains the covenant engraved upon its heart when it gives itself away in order to become what it might become. You might have thought it was just a summer preaching station, a place for enlivening ideas, the Chautauqua of the escarpment. But now our hour is come, the time for pouring out what we've been holding is surely at hand. Planting that seed is an act of love for the future because even if we never meet those who will be fed by our radical little acts of horticulture, there is no containing the abundance of the life that it will yield—a hundred-fold, a thousand-fold, a billion-fold.

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