

John 12:20-33

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 honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Dying Seeds - March 21, 2021

John 12:20-33

Spring is here! We've adjusted our clocks. The temperature is in the 60s. And there's a good chance that by the summer life may be almost back to normal. We have a lot to celebrate!

Spring is the time of renewal. It is no coincidence that just as we celebrate Christmas during the shortest days of the year, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus in the Springtime, as the days overtake the nights in their length. At Christmas, the coming of Jesus into the world helps us remember that he is the light that conquers the darkness. With Easter, the new life surrounding us in the sprouting grass and the budding leaves perfectly symbolizes the new life we have through our faith in the resurrected Jesus! So much to celebrate!

Integral to our celebrations and the life blossoming all around us are seemingly the most insignificant things of all. I'm talking about seeds.

Seeds are amazing things, aren't they? I mean, if you have ever done any kind of gardening, I'm sure you never lose the sense of wonder of taking a handful of odd-shaped specks, putting them in the ground, adding water, and then after a week or so, green appears. How can that be? How can green stuff appear out of these little things? Seeds look like they're dead. They look like grains of sand or even dust particles. There is almost nothing about seeds that might hint at their ability to produce life. Yet, they do.

The miracle of seeds is that something which appears dead is actually the source of new life. Seeds deceive us because they defy our assumptions about the way things supposedly work. That which appears dead, is in fact necessary for creating new life.

But aren't seeds merely one example of that which seems to be dead actually having the capability to live and grow? Life emerges from death all the time.

I'm not sure why we assume that death is permanent state of being. Now don't get me wrong. I'm certainly not downplaying the seriousness, sorrow, and often the tragedy that accompanies death. We have all experienced major losses in our lives of loved ones and family members. We've all felt great sorrow and pain. We've all experienced deep moments of questioning and wondering what our lives will be like in the absence of those we have cherished over the years.

And death is certainly not confined to the lost of our loved ones, is it? Losing a job, having to relocate, watching a house burn down in a fire—these are all forms of death, aren't they? They are all life-disruptive, life changing events. I'm sure we all know of people who have been in mourning,

intense mourning, over such losses. Sometimes the impact of these other forms of death are even more intense than what people experience when a friend or family member dies.

For myself, I have experienced a great deal of loss in my life. Not just parents and friends, but jobs, congregations, a marriage. The effect on my mental and physical health has been profound. Over the years, the impact of the various kinds of death on my life has required me to see therapists and doctors. I'm telling you this because death and loss affect us deeply and the last thing we can afford to do is deny it. I've met too many people who pretend that their losses don't bother them, they appear to take it in stride. They say, "so what, time to move on." They simply refuse to deal with their grief and pain.

But the thing about denial is that when we keep our pain bottled up inside, when we pretend to the world and ourselves that all is well, that pain has a strange way of manifesting itself in our lives both physically and mentally. There is no doubt that denying death in all the forms it takes its toll on us and literally damages us going forward. Death in all its forms has the power to kill us: Kill us mentally, kill us spiritually, and indeed, kill us physically. Let me be perfectly honest with you: it is wrong to deny your pain. It is wrong to pretend all is well. It is wrong to not ask for help because the consequences, not only for your life, but the lives of those who need you, are devastating. Devastating on so many levels.

Death is reality. The lie is denying the many ways and forms death penetrates our lives. Our Christian faith, far from denying death, acknowledges death as very real and yes, even necessary.

Listen to what Jesus said, "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." He said this as it became increasingly obvious that he was headed toward Jerusalem for his final confrontation with the religious authorities, a confrontation he knew would end in his death.

But even as he stated that he had to die, he also redefined the nature of death. To Jesus, death was not about final endings, but about transformation.

What are seeds? They are objects which contain the potential for new life, but are as useless as the sand they resemble unless they are planted, watered, and bathed in sunlight. Then and only then will the seeds sprout and new growth emerges.

In the course of our lives we experience endless forms of death, the death of our bodies being only one kind of death. The question, therefore is not if something happens after death but what can happen after death. For too many people, death is final. Death is cessation. Death is the end of

possibilities. When we experience death in its many forms, we can give up. We can stop trying. We can stop imagining alternatives and new ways of living and being.

Look at the kind of death Jesus is talking about. He speaks of a death which does indeed mark an ending of sorts. The seed dies when it is dropped into the ground and buried. It is no longer a seed. It no longer resembles how we are used to seeing it. Once the seed germinates, once the shoot emerges from it, it can no longer be called a seed. That seed is finished. It did what it was supposed to do, serving as a temporary storage place for new life. That's what seeds really are. They aren't meant to last forever. In fact, we can say that a seed that remains unchanged is utterly useless. Well, yes, some seeds are edible. Some seeds do serve as a source of nourishment. But in the main, most seeds have only one function: to be the starting point for a new plant and new growth.

Such is the paradoxical core of the Christian faith. Our faith is built around death. Unless Jesus died, our entire religion is useless. If Jesus doesn't die, and die a horrible, undeserved death as a completely innocent man, his time on earth was meaningless.

I mean, we love to speak of Jesus as a great teacher. He was humble. He exemplified love and forgiveness. He embraced all whom society rejected. He did not hesitate to challenge authority or tell the truth to the powers that be. These are all wonderful characteristics. These are all things we should personally strive for in our own lives.

But the fact is Jesus is hardly alone in teaching love, respect, and mutual acceptance. History is filled with many great teachers just like Jesus who proclaimed various versions of his message. Look at the holy books of all the world's religions. You will find that they overlap each other in terms of how they urge human beings to behave. We know from personal experience that we Christians hardly live up to Jesus' expectations and standards. We begin our worship every week with a frank and heartfelt confession of sin. We acknowledge that we have fallen short of what Jesus expects from us.

And the reality is every religion admits that its adherents are far from perfect. There is no such thing as a perfect human being, no matter who or what they worship.

But Jesus speaks about death not as a thing to be feared or avoided at all costs, but actually something to be embraced! We are taught from childhood that death is the ultimate form of defeat for human beings. The joke is that because we all die, death is the fate none of can escape from, no matter how hard we try.

Listen, however, to what Jesus says about death, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

In other words, death is not defeat, in Jesus’ view. Death is not about loss, but it is about victory.

How can this be?

Because we are trained to think of death in all of its forms as irretrievable loss, we often choose to view death as a form of defeat from which we cannot recover. Death is seen as an end, only an end. When we lose at life, as we all must do, we call ourselves losers and failures. We blame ourselves, we heap scorn on ourselves, we may literally hate ourselves.

But Jesus tells us that way of thinking is wrong, just plain wrong. It is the way of thinking that belongs to this world. Isn’t that true? Winners and losers. Only two categories. When things go our way, we are winners. When they don’t, we are losers.

In that way of thinking, therefore, Jesus has to be the ultimate loser because he died. He died horribly. He died an innocent man. He can be held up as an example of what happens when you stand up for others and not for yourself. Loser, loser, you are dead! Such is the way of the world. When we live our lives according to the way the world understands death, then yes, death is death and death is final.

But that is not the Christian way. In Jesus Christ, we understand death to be something completely different. Christians do not accept the finality of death as the conclusion of all possibilities. Death, in the Christian view, never has the final say. Death is not, never, cannot be about defeat.

No, for Christians, for those who follow Jesus, death is not about ending. Instead, death is about new beginnings. No matter how bad things are right now. No matter how defeated you may feel. No matter what has gone wrong in your life. No matter if you are moments away from your last breath. Jesus Christ tells us that death does not have the final say. Death does not win.

Hear the good news! Resurrection is the Christian reality. And resurrection is not just about eternal life with Jesus, it is eternal life here and now. When we suffer deaths in our life, and we will, over and over again, we believe that every one of those deaths can be transformed, can be resurrected, can be made into something new, and wonderful, and unimaginably good.

Death never, ever, has the final say. Our faith in Christ will lead us to seek the new life and new possibilities present in all our experiences of death, no matter what happens to us. Ever.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.