

Cross Walk: Falling Grain, Rising Wheat

John 12:20-36a

April 2, 2006

Word about Jesus is getting around. Some Greeks show up requesting to see Jesus. They have heard of this respected Hebrew teacher and want to gather wisdom to complement their own great philosophers. Perhaps they recognize the need for nurturing the heart as well as the head that is fed by the vast knowledge of their own culture. Although the request is made known to Jesus, we are never told that Jesus meets the visitors. Instead he launches into metaphorical language that alludes to his death.

Jesus seizes this moment as the time for a strategic shift in his ministry. Jesus has been waiting for the opportunity to include Gentiles in his ministry. With the interest expressed by the Greeks, he will now consummate his mission. “The hour of glorification” is John’s code phrase for “Jesus’ death by crucifixion.” Jesus does not want to be known simply as a great teacher; he wants to display the self-giving action and love required of all who follow him, of those who see and believe in him as the Son of God. The Greeks who request a meeting with Jesus will not sit at his feet to listen to his teachings. They will see Jesus lifted up on the cross, the crucified one. In this way, glory will come to God as all people are drawn to God through Christ Jesus. “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” (12:24).

After the dying, then comes the fruit. Jesus’ response to the Greeks is a call to discipleship, to follow him in the dying so that the fruit-bearing can begin. That is when Jesus will be seen – after the dying. “Where I am, there shall my servant be also.” Jesus will be seen through those who continue his ministry.

The metaphor of a grain of wheat falling into the earth to die so that it can yield fruit is rich with meaning. Unless a grain of wheat dies, it reaches a “dead end” to its potential. In the wheat grain’s death to its present form and substance, it multiplies its life to others. A dried grain of wheat can last millennia and remain not only edible, but still grow into a plant. Its work is not finished until it falls to the ground in order that a stalk of wheat might rise. That is the potential for which the grain is made, to be multiplied and produce abundant fruit.

Jesus understands that his potential will not be realized unless he continues the path upon which he has embarked, a path of resistance to the powers that be, a course that values all human life, a walk that will meet violence with nonviolence. If he plays it safe, he will only be known as a

great teacher. However, if he takes the narrow path that leads to death, the whole world will know of him and his death. The message of God's unconditional love will spread in ways we may never imagine. The mystery of God's presence in this man will intrigue people and draw them to him throughout the ages. The seed of love planted by Jesus will be multiplied through his followers across the nations and throughout the ages.

Jesus' cross walk calls into formation a new community that thinks and lives differently than society. Those who walk by the Light, meaning Jesus, those who embrace the Light, who allow the Light to penetrate their being and shine through them, they become united as a family of Light, the children of Light, the children of God. Together they shine in the midst of darkness and show the world another way, just as Jesus has. In the face of the cruel violence that puts Jesus on the cross, the children of Light respond by creating a community that bears witness to the Light of Christ, a community that keeps the Light burning even though the world tries to extinguish it. The ember of light kindled by Jesus is multiplied through his followers as they become lanterns aflame with Light for the world.

Jesus' life was a seed planted to release a harvest of abundant life. As a human being filled with the Spirit of God, Jesus opened up new ground for all humanity to be as open to God's Spirit as he was. From a psychological point of view, Rev. John Sanford writes, "By dying on the cross the grain of consciousness in Christ was sown in the psyche of humankind. With this a new order began and a new development became possible for human life everywhere."

The grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies in order that it may not remain just a single grain, but that it may bear much fruit. In John, 'fruit' is Jesus' metaphor for the life of the community of faith. The saving power of Jesus' death resides in the community that is gathered as a result. It is like what Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador said before he was assassinated at the altar: "I have often been threatened with death, but as a Christian I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise in the Salvadoran people." The Jesus of history rose as the Christ of faith in the life and witness of the Christian community.

In John's gospel, Jesus' death on the cross is not so much a tragedy as it is a strategy.¹ John writes from the perspective of the resurrection, for he writes decades after Jesus' crucifixion and has already seen the fruit borne of Jesus' death. Thus, John shows Jesus embracing his hour of death as an expression of his love for God and an opportunity to bring glory to God. Although Jesus expresses a moment of hesitation when he indicates that his soul is troubled, he forges ahead with commitment and resolve, willing to

face the consequences of his love for God and his love for humanity. He is anxious to be the seed that dies in order that love might be multiplied. His entire ministry has been one not of self-protection, but of self-giving. Here he prepares to take the most radical and most powerful act of self-giving love. Jesus is a seed that does not remain lifeless in its protective coating, but instead falls to the ground, giving up all that makes him a single seed, in order that a plant bearing seeds of love might be born and continue to multiply. In his dying and rising, Jesus conquers evil and destroys the power of sin and death.

Jesus is so committed to his mission because he desires that humans be reconciled to God and be in relationship with God as they are created to be. We humans have a way of putting obstacles in the way of our relationship with God. We run away, we are ashamed of ourselves, we are fearful of God. But Jesus is so passionate about restoring us to meaningful relationship with our Creator that he offers his life that we might have life with God. He has such trust in God's love for him that he willingly gives his life, knowing that he is always held in God's care.

Last weekend I attended a surprise 50th anniversary party for an aunt and uncle in Phoenix. Their friends and nieces and nephews from across the country gathered to join in the surprise. As the weekend went on, my aunt expressed how jealous her friends were of her relationships with her nieces and nephews. Truth be told, we look to my aunt and uncle for some of the love and nurture we have lost from our own parents who have died. I suggested to my aunt that this relationship with them is so important to us because she and her sisters and brother maintained their relationships over the years, sharing occasional vacations, corresponding with letters or e-mail, and attending special events in the lives of family members. Her generation modeled for our younger generation the importance of keeping family ties alive. In the same way, Jesus models for us the importance of relationship with God and with our fellow human beings.

It is often through family and friendships that we learn the gift of sacrificial giving, of generously offering ourselves to others. We witness parents making forfeiting some of their own pleasures or desires so that their children might reach their full potential. Some have given the gift of an organ so that others might live. Others have shared their homes with the homeless. Some have spent their vacations on mission trips expressing the love of Christ.

It is in this kind of service that we experience the rising of something new within ourselves. We cannot force growth or produce it by the strength of our own will. We can only expose ourselves to opportunities which be

the impetus for our transformation. Those opportunities are usually found in giving up our own comfort and extending ourselves in the service of others.

Through Jesus' example of triumphant self-sacrifice we learn that suffering does not have to be avoided at all costs. Suffering instead "becomes one of God's most powerful tools for transformation. It is how God breaks open hard hearts so that they can be made new," or "cracks open closed lives so that they can get some air into them."

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "When Jesus died, this power was made manifest. By absorbing into himself the worst that the world could do to a child of God and by refusing to do any of it back, he made sure it was put to death with him. By suffering every kind of hurt and shame without ever once letting them deflect him from his purpose, he broke their hold on humankind. In him, sin met its match. He showed us what is possible. These are just some of the fruits of Christ's death, things that could never have happened if he had not been willing to fall to the ground."²

This is the season of springtime when we delight in planting seeds in the dark moist ground in order that plants bearing bright blossoms and rich fruit might spring forth. In the Christian year, this is the season of Lent, the springtime of the spirit. We are the seeds borne of stalks of wheat from previous generations of Christians. We are the seeds of Christ's continuing presence in the world. We have a choice to make: will we simply sit in the seed packet, clinging to our protective shells, or will we dare to be planted in the soil of service, where we will be cracked open so that the sprout of new life might grow forth, bearing richer fruit and multiplying the love of God as we experience it through Jesus Christ?

May we trust in the promise of Christ, that falling grain will rise as wheat, bearing loving fruit to share with all.

¹ Rev. Mark Trotter, “From Tragedy to Strategy,” First United Methodist Church, San Diego, March 17, 1991.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Unless a Grain Falls,” *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 64-65.

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