

The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31-34

NEW COVENANT



This Sunday





John 12:20-33

5th Sunday of Lent Year B

The Fifth Sunday of Lent is a great time to get up close and personal with the generative power and value of death.

This week's reading is a fascinating Johannine mash-up for those more familiar with the synoptic Gospels. Jesus' proclamation that those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives will gain eternal life (v. 25), echoes his teaching in the other three Gospels about taking up our cross and following him (Matthew 10:38; Mark 8:35; Luke 14:27). Verses 27-28 are a nod to the Garden of Gethsemane, or perhaps a rebuttal to the synoptic Gethsemane tradition where Jesus prays, with some minor variation, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me ..." (Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:42; Mark 14:36). John's Jesus proclaims that he will *not* ask for this cup to pass him by (John 12:27). And then we get an oddly-placed voice from the heavens – the only heavenly declaration in John's Gospel, which seems to serve the same purpose as God's verbal endorsement of Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:11, et. al.) and his transfiguration (Mark 9:7, et. al.), in the synoptics.

What is unique to John's Gospel and to this morning's reading is this fascinating little parable in verse 24 about the grain of wheat that must fall into the earth and die to bear much fruit. There's nothing else quite like it in any of Jesus' 'seed teachings.' (See Mark 4 for the parable of the sower, the seed growing secretly, and the mustard seed for examples.) Here, the same illustration holds a different message: death is a necessary precondition to life. This truth is evident when we look at the natural world, but it feels backward and counterintuitive to our experience of human life, which, of course, is Jesus' point.

Death is a necessary precondition to life.

This parable also invites us to value what is communal over what is individual. We who are members of the Christ-believing community are encouraged to imitate our teacher and die to ourselves to participate in the new life of the kingdom (v. 25). No one harvests a single grain of wheat; on its own, it's mostly useless. Yet harvested sheaves of wheat can create the very Bread of Life. God uses the power of our collective discipleship, the work of our community, to bear much fruit in the world.

We've heard similar messages elsewhere in Scripture. The sage who wrote Ecclesiastes tells us, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil ... Though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold chord is not quickly broken" (4:9, 12). Jesus promises that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). Paul writes to the early churches, "I thank my God every time I remember you (Philippians 1:3) and "You are the body of Christ," (1 Corinthians 12:27), but our English translations obscure the fact that "you" here is second person plural. To use Southern vernacular, what Paul actually says is "I thank my God every time I remember y'all," and "Y'all are the body of Christ." The greatest value and the greatest efficacy lie in the community.

God uses the power of our collective discipleship, the work of our community, to bear much fruit in the world.

However, what makes the teaching in this morning's reader harder to swallow than the other texts that move us from an individual to a communal mindset is this whole business of death. Of course, that's the most important part. Jesus' hour has come. He is about to begin a journey that every disciple will one day be asked to take. By passing through death, he will achieve for all of us the fullness of life.

I wonder what in John's community needed to fall into the earth and die to bear much fruit. John's first readers were living through the bitter internal conflict in first-century Judaism that would eventually result in a split into separate Jewish and Christian traditions. Perhaps they were learning to let long-standing identities and self-conceptions fall into the earth and die so that a new community might live. Christians in John's time were also experiencing a theological shift from expecting an imminent *parousia* (second coming) to a longer-view vision of what it means to be Christ's followers in a world without Jesus' physical presence. Perhaps their hopes and dreams of the immediate coming of God's kingdom had to die so that the new practice of seeking out the Holy Spirit's presence in the mundane details of daily life could be born.

I wonder what in our communities needs to fall into the earth and die to bear much fruit. Could it be the adult Sunday school class that thrived in the 80s but today hardly draws three people? How about the rummage sale that requires significant volunteer time and energy, but that no one can quite articulate how it is aligned with the church's mission?

If we are brave enough to let these things fall into the earth and die, what new things might be born from their rich and fertile soil? Furthermore, since we are not grains of wheat but much more complicated human beings, what rituals and remembrances can help us grieve for and release these things that are dying, while also confessing our faith that God is not done using us and our community to bear much fruit?

Questions for reflection

1. What in your congregation or community is in the process of dying and giving way? In what ways might this death, painful as it may be, bear fruit and lead to new life?
2. Do you agree that collective discipleship bears more fruit than individual discipleship? Is there a spiritual practice or mission effort you currently engage in alone that you can practice with a larger community?