

**21<sup>st</sup> March 2021**

**Seeds, Death & Spiritual Fruit**

**John 12:20-33**

During the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some churches across America posted John 12:20 in the pulpit where the preacher could see it. *“Sir, we would see Jesus,”* it encouraged a whole generation of preachers to remember their primary task: showing Jesus to people who need a Saviour.

In fact, the entire Gospel of John was written with this very purpose in mind. Near the end of the book, John writes, *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”* (John 20:30-31)

### **Context:**

It is the Feast of Unleavened Bread which occurs the week prior to Passover. It is the day after Jesus entered into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zachariah. The people were shouting *“Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.”* This made the religious leaders indignant resulting in them plotting how they might seize Jesus and kill Him, but at the moment, they are fearful of Jesus because it seems the *“whole world has gone after Him”* (vs. 19). Jesus wept over Jerusalem that day as He considered the future of that city and the nation due to their rejection of Him and His message that would occur within a few days. It is now Tuesday, and Jesus has just cleansed the temple of the merchants and moneychangers. He is now healing the lame and sick and teaching the people.

### **Greeks seek Jesus – v20-22**

*“Now there were certain Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast, these therefore came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came, and they told Jesus.*

These were Gentile covertly who had forsaken the paganism of their own nations and recognized that the God of Israel was the true God. However, because they were not Jews, they were greatly limited in their participation in the worship at the Temple. They could enter the outer court to pray, but they could not get any closer to the Temple. They may have just seen Jesus drive out the moneychangers and merchants from this area, and where He was now healing the lame and the sick and teaching.

The text does not indicate why they went to Philip first, but Philip quickly consults with Andrew, and together they go to Jesus with the request of these Greeks. It is reasonable they may have had some hesitation in bringing the Greeks directly to Jesus without asking. On previous occasions Jesus had kept Gentiles at a distance. For example, Jesus said to the Syrophenician woman, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”* (Matthew 15:24). However, Jesus had also spoken about *“other sheep, which are not of this fold”* (John 10:16), so they approach Jesus with their request.

### **The Analogy of a Grain of Wheat: v23-26**

What we see in Jesus’s reply is that God has much bigger plans than we imagine, and a much different way of bringing about spiritual fruit than we would devise. Let’s see how Jesus explains that in our text.

**First;** Jesus shows us that God has much bigger plans than we imagine. Philip and Andrew are excited with a big reception in Jerusalem and two Greeks seeking Jesus. But Jesus knows that this is just the beginning of something much bigger. This is just a hint of what is to come.

Jesus knows that God has already promised to do much more than this. He knows that in Genesis 12, when God called Abraham, he said to him *“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

*“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” “All the families.”* These two gentiles are barely a taste of what God is doing. Jesus knows this. He says as much in v32 when he says, *“I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”* Jesus knows the scope of what God has promised.

**Second;** Jesus reminds us that God has a much different way of bringing about spiritual fruit than we would devise. Where we would prefer to achieve things in a relatively easy and straightforward way, Jesus reminds us that God works through death and resurrection. And it is in this way that God brings about spiritual fruit.

The task given to Christ is an immense one. He is to die for God’s people. But in addition to that, he is to extend God’s people from a small sub-group in Israel to a level that will bless all families of the earth. And Christ knows that in God’s economy, something like that does not come about in a straightforward way. Something like that requires death and resurrection. If God is to have a great harvest in this world, if it is to extend, to become a harvest that includes all families of the earth, then like the grain of wheat, Jesus knows he must die to produce that harvest. Jesus knows that God works through death and resurrection, and so he is trying to reframe his disciples’ mindset so that they can see what is coming.

When we think of sacrifice, when we think of meaningful acts of love, we often think of grand gestures. We think of a big sacrifice, done all at once, and as if it was on a stage. But real sacrifice – sacrifice that often bears much fruit, and sacrifice the Bible more often calls us to – is the ongoing sacrifice of ourselves in this life. It is the daily sacrifice of our time, our effort, our emotions, that is profound. It is daily labour and perseverance that makes up active love.

While some are called to a dramatic all-at-once sacrifice for the kingdom, Christ points out that most of us are called to the daily sacrifices of ourselves. In our text this morning he says *“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me;”* In Luke 9 he speaks of the same theme and says, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”*

Jesus’ strong language of *“hates his life in this world,”* is similar to the language He used in Luke 14:26 (*“If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple”*). Some of you might remember last week, I said, it is very hard to accept unconditional love when we hate ourselves. Guilt kills, Grace brings life! Jesus didn’t come on a rejection mission, but a rescue mission, to give life!

This is not a command to hate others or ourselves. It is a statement of comparison and contrast as in Luke 14:26. Our love of Jesus needs to be so great that by comparison our love for the things of this world, self, and others would seem like hate.

What we see is that, in his death and resurrection, Christ has not only established his kingdom, he has not only forged the path for his people to follow in death, but he has also set a path for us to follow in life. It is a path of death and resurrection. It is a path modelled after the grain of wheat. And it is a path he calls us to in every area of life. We see it everywhere.

a) We see it in our marriages; Marriage is complicated, and marriage takes work, and wisdom, and understanding. But when your marriage is stuck, and when your marriage needs to grow, the first thing it needs is NOT usually to work on your communication skills, or to work on your finances, or work on your sex life, or to work on any number of things that could use work. Now don't get me wrong, those things are all important, and they all usually need work. But they are not the first thing needed, or the most important thing needed. The most important thing needed is for each person to make the choice to die to themselves in order to serve the other. To die to themselves. Only then can abundant fruit begin to grow. Only then can we begin to see real fruit in all those other areas.

b) We see it in parenting; When our first daughter was born, we were delighted. We had had a miscarriage and that was painful. For the first 12 months our beautiful daughter was a terrible sleeper. She would virtually wake every hour on the hour. I thought I was a fairly placid sort person, but in the middle of the night rocking her the pram trying to get her to sleep, I tended to get a little harder each time I rocked the pram! Sometimes the repetition of it, and the frustration of it, and the mundane nature of it, and the predictable rebellion of their little hearts makes parenting feel like death. Do you know why parenting sometimes feels like death? Because it kind of is. Because when you make lunch for what feels like the millionth time, and when you have to apply discipline for what feels like the millionth time, and when you have to change a nappy for what feels like the millionth time, you are choosing to die to yourself in order to bring about abundant fruit in their lives. And just like real farming, you don't see the fruit right away. It takes a while! But, it is worth.

c) We see it in our individual spiritual lives; If you want to see growth in your spiritual life, if you want to see sanctification and maturity increase in yourself, the path will rarely be easy or straightforward. It will almost always be through the path that Jesus paved: the path of death and resurrection. The path of dying to ourselves.

d) We see it in friendships. If you want your friendships to grow and increase in trust and intimacy, it won't usually be by a process that is easy, but by a choice that you make to die to yourself in order to better love your friend.

e) We see it in churches. Most church-growth books and seminars aside, real, meaningful, and lasting church growth does not happen by getting just the right program implemented just the right way. Programs matter, to be sure. But a church cannot grow in a positive way without the decision to die to ourselves: A decision first of individuals in the church to die to themselves to serve their brothers and sisters in Christ, and a second decision of the church as a whole to die to themselves for the life of the community around them.

Put another way, if you want to see the church grow, it often begins with investing your time in fellow members of the church who could benefit from your friendship, but whom you find it difficult to be around.

### **Jesus' Troubled Soul: v27-33**

Jesus' hour has come. Like a teenager on a roller coaster that is cresting the first big hill, Jesus knows that an inevitable chain of events is about to unfold. Humanly speaking, there must be some anxiety. But Jesus knows that this is the hour where he glorifies his Father.

God's greatness will be magnified by Jesus' willing self-sacrifice. His perfections will be seen with greater clarity through the cross.

In response, the Father speaks to encourage and affirm his Son (v28). The mutual giving of glory between Father and Son further reveals the life of the Trinity.

The Father's glory means that his enemy is driven out (v31). Judgment will be executed. And yet, for now, the judgment of which Jesus speaks is the cross. He will be 'lifted up' (v32-33). And the crowd understands that Jesus is referring to his own death because they respond in verse 34 saying, "...the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'?" The judgment to be enacted now will be borne by Jesus, on behalf of the world, and so Satan's bond will be broken. Death's sting will be removed. Judgment will recoil upon Evil itself.

### **Conclusion:**

Beyond our marriages, our families, our friendships, and our church, we see the lesson of the grain of wheat play out in our lives out in the world too. What is it you are trying to do out in the world? What has God called you to in your vocation, your relationships, in the various organizations you participate in? Even there you know that fruitful growth and success requires self-sacrifice. Work done well and faithfully requires that we die to ourselves in order to see a fruitful harvest.

And so, in the image of the grain of wheat, in his death and resurrection, Christ reframes our lives. He reframes our lives and our callings in him.

The world around us and our hearts within us clamour for something easier. They clamour for something straightforward. And to that end we are willing even to accept more modest goals in life.

The same mindset existed in Jesus's day too. But he rejected it. He rejected the idea of a modest earthly kingdom gained in an easier and more straightforward way in order to achieve an eternal, and one day world-wide, kingdom attained through his death and resurrection.

And in doing that he forged a new path for us. It is a new path for our death, so that while death is always hard, it is not hopeless. Those who have put their trust in Christ, those who have followed him in this life, will also follow him in death. Planted in the ground like a grain of wheat their bodies await the call of their Lord when he returns, and then they will spring forth in new life for a heavenly harvest.

And Jesus also forged a new path for this life. The lesson of the grain of wheat, the story of the death and resurrection of Christ, now form the paradigm for how we live our lives. We are called to take up our cross and die to ourselves daily. We are called to die to ourselves again and again, in the great and in the mundane, in order to bring about the fruit of the kingdom of God in this world – in our marriages, in our children, in our spiritual lives, in our friendships, in our church, and in our lives out in the world.

That path is not an easy one. We will fail again and again. But thankfully we have a Saviour who can sympathize with our weaknesses. We have a Saviour who forgives our sins. We have a Saviour who leads us on, down the path he has forged, as we seek one step at a time to follow in his footprints.

We trust, by his grace, that we will follow him in our death. Let us then seek to also follow him in our life.

Prayer