

“More than a recipe, a relationship!”
Jeremiah 31:31-34 John 12:20-33

One of the things we did during our time away last week was to spend time in Orlando with my family. We take great pleasure in the simplest things, so one afternoon our entertainment was for my Mother and Christine to work together out on the back porch polishing brass candlesticks while I cooked supper. I don't cook very often but this was especially fun for me because I was using two recipes that I had found in my Mother's cookbook and which I fondly remember from when I was younger. They were just enough of a challenge, and I think perhaps I made it under the wire for them to be included in the Glory Group cookbook. A good recipe is both a challenge and doable at the same time.

I have heard that years ago, when the Betty Crocker Company first began selling their cake mixes, they offered a product which only needed water. All you had to do was open up the package and add water to the mix, and voila you would get a perfect, delicious cake every time.

The product bombed. The sales were very low, and the company couldn't understand why, so they commissioned a study which brought back a surprising answer. It seemed that people weren't buying the cake mix because it was too easy. They didn't want to be totally excluded from the work of preparing a cake; they wanted to feel that they were contributing something to it. So, Betty Crocker changed the formula and required the customer to add an egg in addition to the water. Immediately, the cake mix was a huge success.

I believe that we in the church also make the same mistake when it comes to presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ. Far too often we try to make the call of Jesus Christ as easy as possible because we are afraid that people won't "buy it" if it seems too hard or asks too much of them. But when the gospels are allowed to speak for themselves there are no easy recipes or formulas. I don't know how you are doing with your Lenten discipline, but personally I am very aware of having slipped and fallen short many times. I have had to pick myself up and dust myself off numerous times.

Lent is tough. These spiritual practices, even though they seem quite simple in and of themselves seem very easy to avoid. The scripture passages are intense, dense, and complex. There is no, just add an egg and water and stir thoroughly kind of spirituality. They challenge us to look with honesty at our lives, they confront us with our personal fragileness, our mortality, but at the same time, there is the potential of a glorious promise of eternal life revealed here as well.

Jesus speaks in metaphors marinated with meaning, simmering with vivid emotion. It can all feel so very dense. As I worked this week to memorize this passage that is what I experienced; it all just felt too thick. At one point Friday afternoon I was working on this passage and just needed to take a break so I

wandered over to the kitchen where some of our ladies were preparing for the chicken salad luncheon, so I spent a little time there just chopping celery, trying not to chop off my finger in the process.

Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Jesus then explains what he means. He said, “Those who love their life lose it, but those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” That is not a secular formula for happiness, but it is a spiritual truth. Do you remember the Beatles Album called “Abbey Road?” I think it was their next to last. Last song on that album is titled “The End, and the lyrics go, “And in the end the love you take is equal to the love you make.” I actually think that the gospel is more radical than that. One mystic poet puts it this way, “What is the cure for love? More love.” The truth of this is written in the patterns of all creation. It is evident for everyone to see. It is even found in something as small as a grain of wheat, a seed. Jesus is using this little seed to describe the pattern of his life. Let’s take a closer look at what he says.

First of all, he says that when a grain of wheat falls in the ground it must die. The seed must surrender to the earth. What is happening here is that Jesus is in Jerusalem along with thousands of other pilgrims for the celebration of the Passover festival. His reputation and notoriety has been increasing and so has the tension between his popularity with the crowds and their Messianic expectations, and the corresponding envy and hostility of the religious leaders. It is not only Jewish people who are gathered but many gentiles are also there for the festivities, and it is significant that some Greeks gathered there have heard of Jesus’ reputation, and they seek out Phillip, one of his disciples and ask to see Jesus.

Phillip sees a real opportunity here and seeks out Andrew and they both go to Jesus. What is the opportunity? These Greeks are not part of the Jewish establishment, they are not caught up in all the petty rivalry. The Greeks were the cultural arbiters of the day. They had real class and clout. Phillip and Andrew must have recognized that if these Greeks could just speak with Jesus as they had spoken with Jesus, if these Greeks could just experience his presence as they had experienced his presence then this was a way out of all this tension for both Jesus and his disciples. Why stick around Jerusalem when the signs were increasingly ominous there, why not see if these Greeks would invite Jesus to travel with them back to Greece, then the whole world could experience the marvel of his presence. What a plan! What a strategy! They recognized that this was a critical moment.

But escape was not what Jesus had in mind. Jesus was not looking for an ingenious strategy. Jesus was focused on one thing, being faithful to his relationship to his Father and reflecting his glory, his character, his purpose. Jesus was not looking to save himself. We don’t need to romanticize this, Jesus didn’t, he said “Now my soul is deeply troubled.” He prays “Father, glorify your

name.” When Jesus talks about glory he is not referring to anything spectacular at all, he is talking about character and a deep seated sense of relational identity.

Next Sunday we celebrate Palm and Passion Sunday and then Holy Week. This is the critical moment for Jesus. When I was in construction I had a young man working for me named Danny. One day we were kidding around and Danny told me, “Stephen, I will be with you through thick and through thin. When the going gets thick, I’ll be thinning on out.” Well, Holy Week is when the going got as thick as it could for Jesus, and the reality is that they all thinned out, every single one of them.

But Jesus teaches us that his Passion is not just a spectator sport, it is to be a model for his disciples for the rest of our lives. “Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am there my servant also will be. The meaning of the Passion is not just the character of God’s love toward us; it is also the rule for our conduct toward one another as long as we shall live.

That brings us to the second characteristic of this grain of wheat. Jesus said, when a grain of wheat dies, it bears much fruit.

Do you remember the movie "Mr. Holland's Opus," starring Richard Dreyfus. Recently we watched a clip of it during the Focused Living Retreat. It is a movie about the difficulties a man experiences as he struggles with adapting to the life he had instead of the life he would have preferred, the life he wanted. Mr. Holland was a musician, and he dreamed of being a composer, but life happened to him instead. He was married and a baby came along and expenses too. Life seemed to keep interfering with his dream. So he found a job teaching music at the local high school, but whenever he could find a little spare time, he would compose music, just a little at a time.

Throughout the story his teaching responsibilities forced him to make choices all the time between being attentive to his students, and spending time composing his dream symphony. And over and over it looks like the students kept winning over the symphony, even though his dream was still to live a composer's life, but eventually that dream to be a composer slowly dies to his lived identity as a teacher who just composes in his spare time.

The "much fruit" he bore became clear in the finale, when after many long years of touching young lives with his gifts. His "opus" was not the music marked on a sheet of paper, but a brilliant symphony composed of the individual lives that he encouraged and nurtured through his teaching.

Is this not what Jesus was getting at? "When a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it surrenders to new life and bears much fruit."

And finally, who is this seed, this grain of wheat? The grain of wheat that dies and bears much fruit is Jesus himself. We are grateful here for the honest witness of the crowd who struggle with this. What do you mean, they demand? If you are the Messiah, the Messiah is the one who promises eternal life, they think, not very different from us that Jesus is the way to avoid or evade the struggle with our mortality. Jesus doesn't explain everything. He merely insists that they follow what light they have so that they can live into their true identity as children of the light.

The death of Jesus is not merely a glorification of suffering. If that were so, we would just have a big pity party every week when we gather to worship. I like the quote by Anne Morrow Lindbergh on the back page of this week's insert. She writes, "If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable."

In response to all the envy and selfishness and violence of this world Jesus chooses to open his arms and remain vulnerable and loving and forgiving and in that gesture of complete openness and vulnerability he exposes all of the violence of this world for what it is and he offers forgiveness and peace.

The cross is indispensable to our faith. For in it we learn of the real power of God's love. That has dimension that is both profoundly personal and universal all at the same time.

The Christian author Walter Wangerin tells about raising his son Matthew. As a young boy Matthew had developed the bothersome habit of stealing comic books from the neighborhood store. Walter tried various means of discipline over a period of time and nothing seemed to work for very long. Finally, he resorted to something he rarely used: a spanking. He did it deliberately, almost ritualistically, and he hated doing it to his son, and he was so upset that when he finished the spanking he left the room and wept. After pulling himself back together, he went back in to Matthew and hugged him.

A number of years later, Matthew and his mother were doing some reminiscing, and Matthew happened to bring up the time he kept stealing comic books. "And you know why I finally stopped?" he asked. "Sure," his Mother answered, "Because your Father finally spanked you." Matthew shook his head, "Actually, no, that wasn't it, the spanking didn't really bother me at all." Matthew paused as if remembering that day, "I stopped because Dad cried."

The last week of Jesus life is called the Passion for this reason. God weeps for the sins of the world. God weeps for every act of violence. God weeps for all the senseless and needless suffering in the world. God weeps every time we try to lord it over others, every time we try to be better than another, every time we try to belittle another, every time we think we are more than children of the light. And

in the broken and crucified body of Christ all creation is made whole. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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