

Again & Again, We are Reformed
Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33
March 21, 2021

We have officially entered the season of Spring. I know that many of you have been preparing your gardens, selecting seeds, bulbs or plants, and hiding them in the dark moist soil with the hope that bright blossoms and luscious fruit and vegetables will burst forth. The seed shells are cracked in order for roots to grow deep and shoots to rise sunward.

Jesus often uses agricultural images to illustrate concepts. Today's scripture comes immediately following John's account of Palm Sunday. Jesus embarks upon Holy Week speaking of change, transformation, and new life springing forth from death. He is preparing his disciples for his death, and for the new life that will arise in response to his resurrection. "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."

Unless a grain of wheat dies, it reaches a "dead end" to its potential. When the grain dies to its present form and substance, it multiplies its life, spreading its fruit. That's the purpose of the grain, to be broken open and die to its current form that it might be reformed, multiplied, and produce an abundant harvest.

Jesus understands that his full potential will not be realized unless he continues his path of resistance to the powers that be. His is a path that values all human life. It is a journey that meets 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 God his Father. The seed of God's unconditional love named Jesus will spread in ways he would never imagine, in waves that ripple across nations, cultures, and centuries.

The grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, not to remain just a single grain, but in order to bear much fruit. In John, the word 'fruit' is Jesus' metaphor for the community of faith. Although Jesus dies, he is re-formed into a community of beloved disciples and followers who gather in his name. This is what he means when he says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

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. Jesus was the seed that died in order for new life to sprout up. The seed was transformed into something new and bigger - a living community of faith that continues today. Jesus did not come as a sickle, to cut and destroy, but as a seed, to give life and give it abundantly.

To say, "There is no living without dying," is far different from saying, "There is no living without killing." Jesus said the former. He said it again when he said, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Jesus calls us to die to old ideas and notions that do not serve the common good. Jesus calls us to die to narrow views that define who is in and who is out. The old dies in order for the new to blossom and flourish. Again and again, as we mature, we are re-formed, our minds are stretched, our hearts bloom with compassion, and hopefully we grow in the likeness of Christ.

But growth comes only with change. Jesus said, "Let it die. It's the only way there can be growth." What needs to die for you to have new life? What outdated tapes play over and over in your head that need to be replaced with the astounding good news of God's love for you? What attitude have we clung to so fiercely that it has us stubbornly stuck in narrowmindedness?

A woman loved to cook over the open fire with a huge cast-iron frying pan. She'd had that fry pan as long as anyone could remember, and it worked particularly well over an open flame. One day, when the family was camping, she was cooking with her favorite skillet over a lovely crackling campfire. She was standing on a rock ledge that jutted out high over the lake. With the pan in hand, she stepped back without thinking and toppled right over the ledge into the deep water. Although a pretty good swimmer, she struggled and struggled and couldn't keep her head above water. She was going down for the third time when her husband yelled out, "Let go of the pan!" She did. The cast-iron pan sank to the depths below, and the woman survived!

What must die in order for there to be life? What do you need to let go of so that you can come up for air – and find God waiting for you! Perhaps even saying to you, "Let go of the pan!" There is no living anew without dying to the old. That's how we are re-formed.

Another dimension of Jesus' message is the understanding that seeds are often sown for someone else, not just for ourselves. Jesus did not expect to reap the harvest for the seed sown on Good Friday. The farmer does not sow for him/herself alone. Jesus teaches us about a different suffering, not for one's own sake, but on behalf of others.

There is a story from the Special Olympics in which the thrill of the experience and the opportunity to participate is of far more value than the medals. One runner was winning the race with another runner tripped and fell. The boy in first place circled back and picked up the fallen runner, giving up the gold medal. That's an example of the self-giving service of Jesus.

What seeds are we called to plant for the benefit of others? What legacy of self-giving service might we leave? Followers of Jesus sow seeds not just for ourselves, but for others. We don't expect to reap the entire harvest we plant. We are blessed to share the bounty.

The season of Lent is 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, cracked open so the sprout of new life might grow, 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.

Creator God, we give thanks for the signs of your creative, transforming power around us. Again & again, the seasons change, renewing the earth and restoring fertile ground. We are grateful for signs of new life springing forth from the earth and in our community as schools, businesses, and restaurants move forward in reopening. May these symbols refresh all spirits with hope for the future.

May we seize this season of new beginnings as opportunities to live into new ways of being with one another in the world. Let us leave behind the scourge of racism that has diminished the lives of too many. Reform our way of looking at one another, that we might gaze upon the beauty, uniqueness, and gifts of each one with admiration. Where our motives are too self-centered, help us relinquish selfish ambition and turn toward Christ's self-giving way of service. Guide our society as we learn from the pandemic and seek to right the wrongs of the past.

We lift our prayers of healing for those struggling with Covid-19, cancer, the impact of strokes, mental health, and other illnesses. Refresh them in body, mind, and spirit. Enfold them in the blanket of your love.

We pray for strength for all who are seeking stability having been knocked off their feet in the past year. Bless those who are seeking employment, affordable housing, food for their families, and health care.

We lift to you migrant children & families fleeing terror in their homeland and seeking safe refuge. Guide our nation in offering hospitality to those huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

Renew the Body of Christ on earth today. Bless this congregation with compassion as we have holy conversations about the future and as we anticipate opening our hearts to Pastor Janette and her family. Attune us, O God, to your desire for First United Methodist Church of Santa Rosa.

Bless the United Methodist Church as we struggle through crises and change in our denomination. Guide those charged with leadership and renew their strength.

We give thanks for those who serve us in a multitude of ways. May our nation grow in respect for all human life and work toward the welfare of the common good. Grant wisdom to those entrusted with leadership of your people.

We give thanks for the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We renew our commitment to claim the heart and mind of Christ. Plant seeds of Christ's character deep in our hearts, that we might grow into his likeness. We lift our prayer in the name & way of Jesus, who taught his disciples to pray....

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