

Seeds and Souls

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, March 25, 2012.
The Fifth Sunday in Lent.
Based on John 12:20-33.*

Because I grew up in a land where winters were mild and short, our own mild winter and very early spring have felt to me, at some deep cellular and unconscious level, very meet and right. Remembering last winter, which felt like living in an igloo and seemed to go on forever, I have felt some sense of justice, or at least balance, about our getting off lighter this year. My concern about global warming has given way, temporarily, to delight at seeing the crocuses, daffodils, forsythia and trees blooming, at finding the grass in Central Park greener every day, and at shedding my winter coat and even—gasp—slipping into sandals last week.

Happy as I've been about this early spring warmth and beauty, I have to admit it's made it harder for me to remember it is Lent. Today's chill and gray dampness seem much more Lenten. This is the Fifth Sunday in Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week.

John's Gospel is skillfully setting us up—preparing us—for the spiritual whiplash of Palm Sunday and the beginning of that intense Holy Week journey. Our reading today is like a bridge, helping us cross over from accounts of Jesus' life and ministry to what will unfold in the last week before Jesus' death.

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.

A grain of wheat falling into the earth . . . what a timely image to reflect on now when farmers, at least in our part of the world, are preparing the earth, plowing last year's stubble under, breaking up the hard dirt, working in organic matter to make the soil rich and ready to receive the grains of wheat and corn, the seeds of lettuce and cucumbers and carrots. Home gardeners are poring over seed catalogs, planning their spring gardens, maybe already starting seeds indoors in tiny cups.

I can still remember planting seeds in school, and in Sunday school. Maybe you remember doing that, too? Taking those tiny, dry-looking shapes and dropping them into dark soil in a paper cup with a few holes punched in the bottom, sprinkling some water on them, putting the cup in a sunny window. Then watching the cup every day—at first because the teacher told you something would happen, later because you knew from experience that something *would* happen. When the time was right, when the hour had come, something did happen. First a tiny white worm-looking thing appeared, and then some green leaves. And then, amazingly, it grew into a bean plant, or a watermelon, or a sunflower. Besides the excitement and pleasure you got from watching all this happen, you had the satisfaction of eating what you had grown—or admiring it in the case of a flower—and maybe even sharing it with others. What's more, then you had lots of beans, or watermelon seeds, or sunflower seeds to start the whole process over again the next year.

The seemingly simple lesson of the seed that we learn when we are young teaches us on several levels. Aside from plant biology, what we learn about the seed helps us understand how our own bodies change as we grow up, and how they continue to change as we mature in life. It takes longer to understand that our souls also need to grow and change as we mature. Maybe our culture just pays less attention to the growth of the soul . . . I wonder what might happen if we paid more attention to that, beginning at early ages?

To die is to change. Dying means changing. Change is easy, right? And we all really like change, yes?

In this seemingly simple lesson of the seed, John's Jesus is telling his disciples that he is going to die; he is trying to prepare them for what is to come. But in what he says next, Jesus is also saying something important about the growth of a soul:

Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

One note here: the words "love" and "hate" in our translation carry great emotion for us. But John's community would have heard and understood those words differently. John's community would have understood "love" not as warm and fuzzy feelings, but as meaning "to place great value on" or "to value very highly." They would have understood "hate" not as a hot or vengeful emotion, but as meaning "to consider less valuable" or "to value less."

The word "life" in this context would not have meant biological life to John's community, or even liveliness (as in *joie de vivre*); they would have understood "life" in this context to mean something more akin to what we mean by "self."

Those who place great value on their self will lose it, give it away, spend it, share it; those who consider their self less valuable will cling to it, will keep it for themselves forever.

If we hold onto our seed, then all we have is that seed. If we are able to let the seed go, into the dark earth, out of sight, then it grows into something else entirely, something much more than one seed, something that benefits not only us, but others as well.

And so it is with our self, our soul. If we hold onto our self, our soul, then all we have is our self. If we are able to let our self, our soul, grow and change, if we offer ourselves to something larger and more important than our own self, then our offering has the chance to grow into something else entirely, something much larger than our one soul, something that benefits more than just us.

If I ask you to think of someone you admire greatly, who comes to your mind?

Why do you admire them?

Are you thinking of someone who is selfish or self-centered or self-absorbed? Someone who consistently puts him/herself first, last and everywhere in between? Someone who takes and takes and takes without giving? Someone who gives, but only to get?

Maybe you are thinking of someone who has extended her/himself to do something for you and/or someone else? Someone who may have risked their own life to save another's? Someone who has given of themselves to make their community, or this world, a better place? Perhaps someone who has stood up for, even given their life for, a cause they believed in? Or someone who has devoted their life to a cause greater than themselves?

When I tried this, I thought immediately of some well-known people, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

I thought of some other people, too, less well-known and even powerful examples to me because I know them.

I thought of a mother and father who are working hard—really hard, spending most of what they earn to give their children not luxuries, but a solid start in life: emotional health, physical health, a good education, and most of all, the security of knowing their parents love them and will be there for them no matter what.

I thought of a couple who cared so much about people in another part of the world that they started a non-profit to help those brothers and sisters not with handouts, but by supporting them in lifting themselves out of poverty into health and dignity. This couple has chosen to live very modestly, so that they can give more of their money to help others who need it more than they do.

I thought of a friend who is rector of a church in another part of the country. When, in this recent depression, it appeared the church budget would have to be cut substantially, he looked carefully at all the numbers, realized the crippling impact on other staff members, and decided his was the salary that would be cut, rather than those of his staff.

I thought of the first responders on 9/11.

I thought of people here in this community of St. Bart's who give of their time and talent and treasure because they believe in this place and what we are called to do, and they want to make a positive difference in this world.

I thought of my friend Margaret, who died on Valentine's Day this year. Her calm, courageous choices, her gentle spirit and humor and honesty as she faced her own death taught all of us around her how to die. Her dying has already born much fruit and will continue to do so.

To die to self, to give one's life/self in service of something greater—to do that is to risk, to risk changing. To die is to change. In the Episcopal Burial office in our *Book of Common Prayer* are these words: "For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens." [BCP 382] Life is changed, not ended.

How would you like to be remembered? Now that is a worthy reflection for this Lenten season . . . and beyond.

As a result of Jesus' life, and particularly as a result of Jesus' death, a community is formed—a community of beloved disciples. That is John's community. That is this community of St. Bart's. Because Jesus lived and died, we exist as a community. Jesus' life and death are the reason we exist.

We are the fruit of Jesus' living and dying.

We are the fruit that shows Jesus' love, and God's love, to the world, and invites the world to join in that relationship of love.

May it be so. Amen.

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