

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-13

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

“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.”

This is the beginning of Jesus’ answer to Philip and Andrew who have come Jesus to tell him that there were some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover and had approached them asking to see Jesus.

Like the Greeks, we all want to ‘see’ Jesus. His answer to them explains who he is and by extension who all of us are who believe in him and follow him.

On Thursday morning, I awoke to the news that a Navy plane had crashed on a routine training mission in Key West. It was just a mile from the runway. Immediately I thought of my son, Warren and daughter-in-law, Amy who had spent many hours on training missions in Key West while on active duty in the Navy. It was only a fleeting thought at that moment, but even more close to home when I learned that these two Naval aviators were in the Black Lions Squadron...the same squadron Warren and Amy were serving when they met each other. It was all too close to home. Later in the day, I found out that not only were these two aviators Navy comrades, but that the pilot was a good friend of Warren’s. They had flown together in the Flying Redcocks squadron also based at Virginia Beach. As I listened to my son share his memories and his grief, I realized how truly close this tragedy had now become.

On Saturday, I attended the funeral of Linda Mathis’ mother as the representative of St. Paul’s. Once again I was struck by both the inevitability of death and the tragic nature of separation when life comes to an end. While all of us as believers can intellectually celebrate the hope of the resurrection and the sure belief that life continues after this one, the grief of loss is present and palpable when death comes. For me, this week has once again been an exercise in coming to terms with such a loss which seems so permanent at the moment. We usually have 7 or 8 months to get adjusted to the news that someone is about to join us...that the birth of a new person is on the horizon, but rarely do we have that kind of time to prepare to adjust to the fact that someone is about to leave us. Even if they have been ill and we suspect that death is imminent, when it comes it hits like an oncoming train. It’s a shock and we are stunned and left to try to make sense of it all.

And when death comes, what do these people we know and love leave behind? Surely they leave loved ones with broken hearts and mountains of memories...and now a void in their lives. We are challenged to assess all that this person has meant to us...all the love we received and all the love we gave...the memories we made and the laughter we shared...those moments when things didn't go so well between us and the moments of learning and growing because of this person. That life that we mourn has somehow touched us and changed us. Our conscious memories of them tend to focus on all the things we loved about them and any difficulties we might have had with them tend to fade into the background. That life we mourn has contributed to who we are as a person and perhaps influenced who we might become for having known and loved them. The love we received from them and gave to them is like a chain reaction. It continues to move on to others we will love and others who will love us.

In this conversation in the gospel this morning with Andrew and Philip and the other disciples, Jesus is once again trying to prepare them for what is ahead. He wants them...and us...to understand what his death will mean not just to him, but to them and to us. His explanation of his mission...of the purpose of his death...and what it will mean for us...is hard to understand even now. It must have been completely mystifying to those who heard him speak these words:

“Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

Jesus has already told his disciples...and us...that we are to love one another. He's told his disciples that people will know that they are his disciples because of the way they behave...the love they have for one another and the love they have for others, even their enemies. He doesn't tell us that we should never have disagreements. Differences of opinion are always part of all our relationships...sometimes even our relationship with God. But Jesus has charged us to be connected to each other...to love each other...to influence each other...to feed each other. We are to build relationships with one another.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus has shown his disciples...and all who follow him...and us...what God is like. He has explained to them and to us what he expects from us. He has given us a mandate of what we need to do to follow him. We need to worry less about taking care of ourselves and look around us at those who desperately need help and to worry about taking care of them. It's not about keeping ourselves safe. It is about keeping others safe. It's not about worrying about our own needs. It is about meeting the needs of those around us.

We are all grains of wheat. And we have a choice. We can remain a grain of wheat or, as Jesus described for us, we can die to ourselves and bear much fruit. We can bear the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Dying is part of our lives if our faith is to mean anything.

So what in us needs to die in order for us to become the person that God has ordained us to become...in order for us to bear the fruits of the Spirit?

Is it an attitude that needs to be adjusted?

Does our sure understanding of God...the things we know...or think we know...about God need to die?

Is it a long-held emotional position that logic tells us is not valid the thing that needs to die?

Is it a prejudice of some kind so deeply hidden within us that we are almost unaware that it is there? Does that need to die?

Do our beliefs about social status, gender, lifestyle, material wealth and religion need to die?

Do our ideas about what we are sure we need to survive need to die?

Do our ideas about where we fit into God's kingdom need to die?

Do our ideas about the material world in which we live need to die?

Do our ideas of what we believe to be the limitations of God's love need to die?

Are there rules, regulations and traditions within our own religious expression of our faith that actually block people from experiencing the love of God through us? Do they need to die?

What needs to die in order to prevent us from putting God very neatly in a box of our own making that limits God's power as well as God's love?

Jesus' invitation to us to "come and die" is an invitation to let go of what we think we know about the world, about God and about life itself in order for us to be born again into the creation that God intended us to be in the first place.

It doesn't necessarily happen all at once. It needn't happen all at once. It is a gradual dying to the things we think we know that we come to realize are just not that important...so that the things God wants for us become the things we realize are at the heart of a life filled with the Spirit. The thing that give us true life.

If we step out in courage to begin to live the life that we imagine God is calling us to live...just one small step at a time...we plant the one seed that can then sprout into something big and spread. One kind deed begets another kind deed and then two kind deeds are begetting more kind deeds. It begins to spread like wildfire. We smile at a stranger and they smile back. It's a chain reaction.

Nothing can stop the growth of the kingdom of God...except us. And not because we intentionally block it, but because we fail to plant that one seed...and then the next...and then the next...and so on. We can actually inhibit the coming of the Kingdom that we so desperately pray for by simply failing to plant the seeds...by our inaction. What is it that keeps us from taking action? Is it shyness? Is it fear? Is it a focus on self-preservation? Is it disinterest? Is it doubt? Is it the mistaken belief that it's not up to us?

What needs to die today within us so that we can begin to be born of the Spirit that God has given us?

God provides the answers. All we need to do is ask.

God provides the strength and the will. All we need to do is ask.

God provides all that we need. Just ask...and be willing to die to all that stands in the way.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.