

Sunday, April 5, 2020

Palm Sunday

Rev. Thomas Bartha

John 12:20-33 -- "THORNS DO NOT WEIGH MUCH"

Key text: John 12:24—“*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.*”

On the front lawn of our former home in Michigan stands an evergreen tree, half as tall as the Shawnee Church sanctuary. In kindergarten daughters Sarah and Molly brought that tree sprout home in a Dixie cup, really a tiny seed. We nurtured it on the windowsill through winter, and then planted it in the spring...as we had planted numerous Dixie cup sprouts over the years. But this one took root, and grew, and grew. As any gardener will tell you, a seed must be buried before new life springs forth. That is a principle of agriculture, and also of faith.

It is festival time in Jerusalem. The city is bustling. Word reaches Jesus that Greek inquirers have traveled far in search of him. "We wish to see Jesus." But watch: Do you see Jesus taken aback, the quick intake of breath? "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Something significant is happening. Up until this moment Jesus has said, "The hour has not yet come." To his **mother** at the wedding feast, when she tells Jesus the wine has run out: "Woman, my hour has not yet come." To those who desire Jesus to be **less secretive** in his miracles: "My hour has not yet come." Even Jesus' **enemies** are powerless to seize him, we are told, because, "his hour had not come." Now, in the presence of these visitors, Jesus says, "The hour has come for the son of Man to be glorified."

What exactly does that mean? Glorified signifies remarkable, exalted. "Oh, that was a glorious sunset!" The basketball player sinks a three point shot in the final second. Teammates swarm. "He's in his glory." Our hymns reflect this: "Glorify Thy name in all the earth," "Glorious things of Thee are spoken."

Glorified. "At last," Philip thinks. "At long last Jesus shall be revealed in full glory. Now all shall see!" Yet what does Jesus say about glory: "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 glory of a different sort.

There was an 18th century German artist named Steinberg. Out walking one morning, he was drawn to a gypsy girl dancing in the town square. He invited her to his studio, to pose, and she became the model for, "Dancing Gypsy Girl," which I understand to be a famous work. While in the studio she wandered about, examining the artist's brushes and tools, unfinished works. She took particular interest in a half-completed painting of the crucifixion.

"He must have been very evil, to have been nailed to a cross like that."

"Oh, no," said the artist, "he was very good. In fact, he died for the world."

The girl studied the painting. Casually she asked, "**Did he die for you?**"

That question stayed with the artist long after she left. "Did he die for you?" "Yes, he died for me, but exactly how?" Have you ever wondered about that? How does something that happened two thousand years ago affect what you or I do tomorrow? I need a better understanding of the connection between Jesus' death and our life. Nowhere is it so succinct as in this teaching: "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, a kernel of corn, as long as it remains intact and above ground, can impart no life. It must experience a kind of burial before it can nurture growth; a new life bursts forth. .

Jesus had a commanding vision that shaped his life, far different from what motivates so many. He saw glory rising out of shame, fruitfulness as a result of his death, gain coming out of loss. He knew that in order to bring forth a great harvest, of those who follow Jesus' way of devotion to God, he would have to first pass through death. He would lay down his life so there would be growth. There is no other way.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single seed; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

In recent weeks we have watched remarkable acts of selfless caring during this coronavirus pandemic—from medical personnel, nurses and physicians and emergency responders on the front lines, and so many others in service positions who are risking everything to care for others, even their own lives. We are going to be seeing more of this. It is a remarkable turning point in our world, as priorities shift. Thinking of the scripture passage at hand, there are a host of quiet saints who serve selflessly, consistently, giving themselves away and barely anyone notices. In the past, it seems, the world has put weighty crowns on the power-brokers and headline-makers, the mighty and the powerful.. That is changing. Jesus' crown was light. THORNS DO NOT WEIGH MUCH. Jesus' glory was in his serving, in the basin and the towel. The only time Jesus ever looked down upon anyone was when he looked down from the cross.

Because Jesus was willing to die, people discover that death is not the worst thing that can happen. A life with nothing greater than ourselves to live for--that is empty. Because Jesus was willing to die, a new community was born, one that redefines life on the basis of Jesus' death. The church that understands its mission to serve and to sacrifice and to give itself away and to point people to Jesus is on the pathway to life.

One thing more: "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*" Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. He knew the cruelty and suffering ahead. "My soul is troubled. What do I say--Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason I have come." Jesus is deeply aware that his life on earth is moving toward its conclusion. Forces have been set in motion from which there is no turning back. Yet Jesus foresees a worldwide influence, a universal attraction that will

persist and grow because he dies in this way. His death, he knows, will bring countless women and men to saving faith.

You or I can be driven by all sorts of forces--a drive to achieve, or accumulate, or accomplish a goal. Only love can draw us. The sight of Jesus crucified, dying in our place, for our failings, out of sheer love...is the most magnetic force in the universe.

In a large midwestern city, atop a tall building sits a Cross, lit at night and visible for miles. Some years back there was an electric malfunction; the illumined Cross was dark. Crowds in the street were looking up at the workers. "What is happening?" "Oh, something is wrong with the Cross. The Cross is not working."

The Cross is still working. The Cross is still the power and wisdom of God, drawing all toward Himself. Do you feel the pull of the Savior's dying love? I love to think that we share a hunger to follow the way of this One who lived with such abandon--Dying to self, living for Christ. I would give anything to live like that. I am dying to live like that. And the promise that lies at the heart of our faith is that it shall be so. Amen.

Lord, we have just heard: no sacrifice, no harvest. Grant us wisdom to see what in us must die if we truly are to live in you. Then, grant us patience to wait for the seed of your spirit to grow within, that we would share in the eternal joy of your harvest; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.