“***Falls into the Earth***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Mar. 14, 2020

**John 12:20–32** 20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24Very 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. 25Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27 “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” 29The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” 30Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

If you had a favorite teacher when you were young, could you remember now what he said in a particular lecture? Probably not. But you could remember some of the most vivid and interesting things he said, though on different occasions. I think that’s what this section is like. The author seems to be stringing together his memories of several different enigmatic sayings of Jesus. Remember that this gospel was written when John was approaching a hundred years of age. Aside from a number of the sayings having to do with death and rebirth, there is no logical flow through this section.

It seems to be a series of unrelated events and sayings. There are the Greeks who come to Jesus, and are handed up the apostolic chain, but then the Greeks are forgotten and the text moves straight into an enigmatic saying about a grain of wheat needing to fall into the earth and die, so that it may bear fruit. This is followed by the paradoxical saying about those who love their life losing it. There is a voice from heaven. Then there is the intriguing saying that the ruler of this world will be driven out. And there is the final saying about his being lifted up and drawing all people to himself.

Let’s start with the first pair of paradoxical sayings. By this time, late in his ministry, Jesus has started talking about his coming death. He knows that his enemies have become implacable. They feel threatened by the spiritual freedom that he would bring, and they discern that his teachings would reduce their power over people’s minds. He knows that they are going to tighten a vice grip around him and eventually arrange for his killing. Here he utters an aphorism about a grain of wheat needing to fall into the earth and die, before it springs forth to new life. In the sense that many people became followers of Jesus after hearing about his death and Resurrection, then these events did “bear much fruit” (12:22). He knew that the dramatic nature of his death and Resurrection would contribute to the spread of the story about him.

It may be that “dying” can also be metaphorical: referring to a kind of death of the ego, a death of earthly desire, a letting go of hope for earthly success. Other meanings can be drawn out, and there does not have to be just one meaning. Dostoyevsky saw in this verse a message of having faith despite suffering, growing spiritually through the experience. It was the inspiration for his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which has a lot to say about sin and sorrow, love and forgiveness, suffering and hope.

Jesus follows this remark with another aphorism about those who love their life losing it, while those who hate their life in this world will receive eternal life. It seems to be an ascetic saying: don’t be attached to *this* life. It implies that we should desire the things of the next life more than the things of this life; like the remark in Matthew: “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt 6:20). This “losing” and “receiving” saying may offer a clue to help us interpret the first saying. Maybe desiring the spiritual things more than the material things makes it easier to fall into the earth and die, when necessary.

The next verse might help us understand, too. Jesus says “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor” (12:26). He seems to be offering comfort here. We know from other passages that death is not final; it is a transition. If we decide to follow Jesus we will be with him, even if that means in the afterlife.

After this, he prays, asking first if he can avoid the dreadful experience that he knows is coming, but ending up being resigned to it, knowing that this is how he has to complete his earth life, and asking God to glorify God’s name. A heavenly voice affirms that God *has* glorified the name. The crowd cannot discern the words, which sound like thunder to them, but apparently the apostles could hear them, for Jesus said the voice came “for your sake.” Furthermore, we have the words here in the gospel, implying that *somebody* heard them. The message is that, despite Jesus’ coming death, God’s name, that is, God’s authority and rule, *has* been affirmed and *will be* affirmed.

Jesus affirmed the Father throughout his life. He said “worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Matt 4:10). He exhorted people to seek and to do the will of God (Mark 3:35; John 7:17). Even in his death he asked the Father to forgive the ignorant people who were killing him, thus acknowledging God as the final judge.

After this comes one of the great optimistic sayings: “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out” (12:31). Jesus also said “I watched Satan fall from heaven” (Luke 10:18). The devil has, in fact, been deposed, though it may not seem like it, and we might like to see more *evidence* of this occurrence. The after-effects of devilish rebellion can still be seen here, but I think we have to accept that lots of human evil is not originated by the devil but by our own selfish or vengeful desires. Poisons grow on the human vine without any help from the devil, poisons like selfish ambition, national aggression, religious bigotry, and racial pride. We need to stop blaming the devil for all human evil. We can, however, give thanks that the rebel ruler of this world has been driven out. The repudiation of the devil goes hand in hand with God’s name being honored.

Finally, when Jesus is lifted up, he will draw all people towards him. This seems to be a double entendre, both referring to his being lifted up on the cross, and referring to the idea of what happens when Jesus is exalted or appreciated. When Jesus is honored and his story told, more and more people will be drawn to him. I find that I can connect this saying with the earlier one that “where I am, there will my servant be also.” Followers of Jesus will lift him up, and they will be with Jesus, actually forever. Further, they know that to honor Jesus is also to honor God’s name. Jesus honored the Father repeatedly in his teachings. And the Resurrection honored Jesus by vindicating him.

Jesus was looking at the big picture. He seems to be saying that we can synchronize with the big picture through the choices we make: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

We have looked at this basket of sayings, and we can draw many meanings out of them, nor need they all be the same. So what should we *do* with today’s lesson? One thing is to remember how and when the Father’s name is glorified. Especially was it glorified in Jesus’ life and teachings. Another is to remember that the devil is cast out; you no longer need to fear the devil. Then, be ready to let go of ego, if that’s what it takes to get ahold of spiritual truth. Know that the decision to follow Jesus ensures that you will be with him. And trust that Jesus knows how to draw people to himself. He has the power. May you have confidence in his guidance. May you be filled with his love through this season and beyond. Go forward, knowing you are on the path.