



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Dead Seed, Living Faith

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John 12:20-33
Hebrews 5:5-10

Lent doesn't strike me as a particularly happy time of year. I usually try to give something up that I enjoy. This year I've given up being a couch potato. Many Lenten songs and scripture passages are somber and solemn. When you think about it, Lent is essentially six weeks that lead up to a death. In general, we consider death to be negative and often connect it with sadness and mourning. This is especially true in America, which seems to be going through an anti-aging phase where everyone is trying to look younger and live longer. It's scary to think about our own deaths. It makes me wonder: can death ever be positive?

Our scripture passage for today is a large foreshadowing of Jesus' death. It's a pretty complicated passage. I decided to work my way through it and see which character I related to most. The passage starts with some Greeks or Gentiles requesting to see Jesus. These verses mark the beginning of a new section in John and the end of Jesus' public ministry. The Greeks are coming to Jesus shows that his "hour" or the time for his death has come. Andrew and Philip show up and ask Jesus to see the Greeks. Jesus responds to them with a confusing parable about wheat, a counterintuitive statement, and several predictions about his own death. A voice comes from heaven and proclaims that God will be glorified by Jesus' death. It soon becomes clear that the crowd listening to Jesus is confused. They misunderstand what Jesus is saying to them. The passage ends with Jesus describing how God will rule the world, and he gives a somewhat straightforward allusion to his death on the cross.

So, whom do I most relate to in this passage? I might relate to the Greeks who want to meet Jesus, but I already have a relationship with Jesus. I don't relate to Andrew and Philip. I definitely don't relate to Jesus. I'm not predicting my own death, and I'm certainly not the Messiah. I'm just going to be honest with you. I relate to the crowd at the end of the passage. When I read this, I feel confused. What's Jesus actually saying in this passage? I'm not the only one who feels like the crowd. Many of the scholars I read disagree on what Jesus is actually saying.

In verse 24, Jesus tells a parable: "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 confusing little parable is quite contradictory. How can a seed bear fruit if it's dead? How can life come from death?

My godmother is a very accomplished gardener. She has one of the biggest private rose gardens in her city. Every year, hundreds of flowers sprout in her garden. It takes a lot of work to make this garden so beautiful. She told me recently that a miracle happens every time a flower grows. Seeds have everything that's needed inside of them to make a flower, but they're dormant. If a gardener left the seeds on her counter, they would not grow. In order to grow, the seeds must be planted and tended well. Once a flower starts to grow, it creates many more seeds. So, one seed with the proper care can produce something much greater.

Jesus may have had this idea in mind when telling the parable. The seed Jesus is referring to isn't just any seed. The dead seed represents Jesus' own death on the cross. Just as a flower grows from a seed, a community will grow from the death of Jesus. People from all nations will gather together after his death. This community is so big that it

includes the Greeks at the beginning of the passage. It's so big that it includes us today.

Entering into this community requires some action from us. In verse 25, Jesus states, "Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This statement is found in all four Gospels as well as some letters from Paul. It presents quite a conundrum. Jesus wants the worldly life of believers to die so they can enjoy an eternal life with God. Death is not a happy thing in American society. Most of us try to avoid aging and death. This death, however, is not necessarily a physical death. It's the death of our sinful selves and leads us into the community of faith. Through Christ's death, we die. Through Christ's resurrection, we rise again in him.

A concrete example of this can be found in baptism, which we're doing today. Baptism is one of our two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church. It's the foundational recognition of Christian commitment and symbolizes a member's entrance into the church community. Jesus tells his followers that they must hate their sinful, worldly self. We are symbolically acting this concept out in baptism.

Two weeks ago, I went on a mission trip to Cuba. While our group was exploring Havana, we visited a small Greek Orthodox chapel. It was so small it could only fit about fifty worshippers. The chapel was beautiful outside and inside, but the most peculiar thing about it was the small pool right outside the doors. The pool had colored tile and was in the shape of a large cross. Half of it was made of dark blue tile and the other half was made of light blue tile. It was about five feet deep with stairs leading into the deepest section in the middle.

As all of us stared in amazement, our translator told us that it was the chapel's baptismal pool. It was the most intricate and beautiful baptismal pool I've ever seen. The chapel baptizes infants and adults. Unlike Westminster, they completely submerge or dunk the person being baptized. If an infant is being baptized, the priest dunks the baby into a shallower section of the pool. If a child or adult is being baptized, it's a bit more complicated. The member walks into the pool on the dark tiled side. They slowly walk to the other side of the pool through the deepest section. Depending on how tall the person is they may have to crouch to be completely submerged. After walking across the pool, they enter into the light tiled section and exit on the light side becoming an official member of the church.

This ritual may seem a bit strange to those of us who are used to water sprinkling baptisms. It's actually deeply symbolic. New members enter into the baptismal pool on the dark tiled side, which symbolizes the world and sin. They fully submerge, which represents their deaths. They walk to the light tiled part and out of the pool, which represents rising and living in Christ.

Although we don't fully submerge our new members, our baptisms represent the same symbol. The act of sprinkling water on the head of infant represents death and new life in Christ. The congregation and parents make promises to the infants through baptism to support the new members as they grow and mature in their new lives in Christ. Plus, whenever there's a baptism, we're reminded of our own baptisms: our own death to the world and resurrection in Christ.

In a sense, this death is scary. We're called to live a life different from the rest of the world. The promise of

baptism is far greater than the sadness of death. In baptism we die to what separates us from God and we're raised to a new life with Christ. So this type of death is actually a joyful death.

Baptism prepares believers to fulfill what Jesus says next in the passage: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will be my servant also." Jesus died and rose again. We also die and rise again with Christ. In baptism, members are committed to being living sacrifices to God. Just as Jesus was a sacrifice, we're also sacrifices.

Many things in our Christian faith are counterintuitive. Just in this passage we see that Jesus' death brings life. Our community is alive in Christ's death. We redefine what life is in light of the crucifixion. We see that in order to have eternal life, we must die to our worldly selves and rise again in Christ. Eternal life isn't just life after death. It's a life that's lived fully in God's presence, which is only possible through death.

The promise of this passage is straightforward. Jesus died so that we may flourish. He died for us so that we may have eternal life with God. We might always be a little confused by some tenets of Christianity. Following Jesus is a matter of letting go and believing in what Christ has done. God will always be faithful and loving. We can live in that confusion when we put our trust in Christ. Praise be to our God who died for us and rose for us. Amen.



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