

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 18, 2018
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:11-16
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

Please don't get up and run for the exits, but today on this fifth Sunday in Lent, I want to talk with you about death.

How we think about death, or *whether* we think about it, depends a lot on our circumstances. A teenager at 15 thinks differently than does a person who is 85. A person who is robust and healthy thinks differently than does a person who is ravaged by disease. Those of us living in Boise have different thoughts about death than we would if we were living in Bangladesh or Syria today.

As Holy Week approaches, the Scripture lessons bring us face to face with the reality of death. In our Gospel lesson this morning. Jesus says:

“The truth is, a kernel of wheat must be planted in the soil. Unless it dies it will be alone -- a single seed. But its death will produce many new kernels -- a plentiful harvest of new lives. Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who despise their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (vv. 24-25)

I confess that Jesus' talk of death here has always made me a little uneasy. Maybe it's because death is something that our culture seems to want to avoid at all costs.

Or maybe it's because he's talking about his own impending death, for which you and I were partly responsible.

But notice the images Jesus uses here in John's Gospel. They are images from *nature*, where death and life are always cycling back and forth. The seed dies in the ground and comes up again with new life, giving great abundance back to the earth.

(I used to see this as a Pastor in rural Illinois where several of my parishioners were farmers. Each spring they would be out in their fields planting beans or corn, etc. I don't ever recall feeling distinctly sad at those times. Probably because I instinctively knew what was coming later.)

What I want us to see from Jesus' words here is that Jesus seems to speak of death as a *necessary -- and even beneficial -- loss*.

There are several ways in which this is true.

First, it is true in *nature*. Jesus has illustrated this with his words, and we clearly see it if we look around us during the planting and harvesting season, or during Autumn when the cold November winds blow the brown, dying leaves from the trees.

The principle that death is a necessary loss is also true in the *physical* realm. Jesus has illustrated this by portraying his own death in terms of a seed planted into the ground -- the death of which leads to new life for many.

The Apostle Paul picks up on this metaphor when he writes to the Corinthians about the resurrection. Here is what he tells them:

But someone may ask, "How will the dead be raised? What kind of bodies will they have?" What a foolish question! When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn't grow into a plant unless it dies first. And what you put in the ground is not the plant that will grow, but only a dry little seed of wheat or whatever it is you are planting. Then God gives it a new body -- just the kind he wants it to have...It is the same way for the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies, which die and decay, will be different when they are resurrected, for they will never die. Our bodies now disappoint us, but when they are raised, they will be full of glory. They are weak now, but when they are raised, they will be full of power. They are natural human bodies now, but when they are raised, they will be spiritual bodies. (I Cor. 15:35-38, 42-44)

Death is a necessary -- even beneficial -- loss. This is true in the *natural* realm, and it's true in the *physical* realm.

But this is also true in the *spiritual* life. In our spiritual lives, new life and growth does not always come to us without there first being some form of *death*. In other words, for God to do His work in us, there are times in our lives when we must choose to "let go" and allow things to die so that we can move forward.

This can be difficult, and we struggle in numerous ways to embrace this dying process in our spiritual lives.

For example, we struggle, and find it difficult to forgive others (or ourselves). The Holy Spirit pleads with us to lay aside our anger and bitterness, to let it go, to let it die, so that he might bring forth something new in us. But when

we keep that anger and bitterness for ourselves, it functions like a spiritual cancer in our lives. Ultimately it can even lead to the death of relationships.

Another example (which I see a lot) is when a person carries around a load of regret -- regret for something that was done in the past, but the tormented one still suffers. I know people who are still punishing themselves for something they did 10, 20, 30 years ago. The Holy Spirit invites them to let that thing “die,” but for some reason they choose to hold on to it.

And it’s not always painful or destructive things that need to die in us so that God can bring us new life. Sometimes, God may ask us to let go of some good and precious thing in our life, like God did with Abraham when He asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. We may struggle to understand what God is doing in those situations. But one thing is certain: *God knows what He is doing in those situations.*

The specifics of our spiritual struggles are unique to each of us, but they are very much present with us. But Jesus reminds us this morning that death is a necessary loss, whether it is in the realm of nature, the physical world, or the spiritual life.

As we prepare to come to the Table of the Lord this morning, let me ask you a question: *What is it in your life right now that God is asking you to let go of, to let die, so that new and better life may come to you?*

Do you need to forgive someone who has hurt you?

Do you need to bury a misunderstanding or disagreement so that healing can begin?

Do you need to take that big stack of regrets (the coulda-woulda-shoulda's) and stop feeding them and giving them energy so that they can die and you can move on?

Is there some anger you've been carrying around for years that is literally making you sick? Do you need to need to give it a decent burial?

Is there something good and precious in your life that God is asking you to release to Him so that you might trust Him more fully?

As we come to the Table of the Lord, bring whatever it is within you that needs to die this morning. *Give it to Christ. Entrust it to him. Let it go.* In exchange, receive the *new* life he wants to give you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.