

*Seeds of New Life*  
John 12:20-33  
Rev. Dr. Anne-Marie Hislop  
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Although the other parents as all dropped off their tots and left, one mom was still standing on the sidewalk near the entrance to the nursery school at the Norwood Park Presbyterian Church. This mom plainly looked distressed in some way, though it was not at first clear what the problem was. I asked if she needed help. “My little boy is crying.” She paused. In that moment I realized that there was, in fact, a child crying – shrieking really – his cries were plainly audible through the closed window nearby. His mother went on to explain that thought it was late fall her son had just started at the nursery school. He had, she said, just turned three. She was obviously uncertain what to do. She went on, “They asked me if he had any security blanket or other item. I told them that I’m his security blanket.” Digging her hands into her jacket pockets, she worried that maybe she should go to him. I assured her that children often cry the first few days and that I know from experience that they usually settle down each time not long after their moms leave. Having been around at the start of the school year, I was also able to share that there had been a number of children who had cried a lot last September and that they had all settled in. Still seeming a bit uncertain, the mom headed toward her car. As she did, the sobs from inside began to subside.

Our text on this fifth Sunday in Lent is from the gospel of John. As the story progresses, Jesus is moving nearer and nearer to his crucifixion. Shortly before our scene, Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. In reaction to that miraculous event, some of the religious authorities were plotting to kill Jesus – and to kill his friend Lazarus. Even though they were plotting to kill him, Jesus made his very open triumphal entry into the holy city, into Jerusalem. That entry, which we commemorate on Palm Sunday, provoked the religious leaders even more as they observe the enthusiasm with which the people were responding to Jesus. It was the time of the Passover feast. Some Greeks, who were likely Jews who had settled in Greece, had traveled all the way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. While there, they approached the disciple Philip requesting to meet Jesus. Whether or not they ever got to meet Jesus seems irrelevant to our author. Indeed, when Philip and Andrew told Jesus of the request, Jesus gave an answer which certainly seems to be a non-sequitur, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Whatever those Greeks may have wanted, whether they were present or not, Jesus’ mind is plainly on his coming death. These verses are theologically dense. We will have to look carefully at what is being said here. Jesus often referred to himself by the title “the Son of Man.” Here he says that he is about to be glorified. Glorified is one of those elusive words which we think we know, but have a hard time defining. What we can say about it is that for Jesus to be glorified was for him to be celebrated with praise and honor. Jesus speaks about coming into his glory, but then immediately offers the image of a grain of wheat falling to the earth. If that grain just lies on the ground, it remains as it has been, a single grain, a tiny piece of potential in its seed coating, but nothing more. But

Jesus says, if that grain dies – if it splits open and ceases to be a single grain, it grows into a plant which bears fruit. The grain or seed must give its life; it must cease to exist *as a grain* in order to bring new life. Then Jesus finishes the thought with one of his more difficult teachings, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” The saying is likely familiar to most of us for this is not the only place in the gospel stories that it appears. It is familiar, but has historically often been distorted by the church to suggest that we should all hate and shy away from the things of this world and focus on the afterlife. A little reflection, though, will remind us that this life, as well as the next, is a gift from God. Life is a blessing. Jesus’ meaning is best understood when we turn back to the line before to consider that grain of wheat. When a grain falls to the ground under the right conditions, its seed coat splits open. A tiny shoot comes from each end – one stretching down into the soil in search of nutrients and water, the other stretching upward to take in the energy of the sun. The grain dies only in the sense that it fulfills its purpose – it does not become life-less, but rather transforms into a new form of life. The text is about death and it is not about death. The crucifixion is about death and it is not about death. Jesus went on to tell his listeners that his soul was troubled. Yet, unlike in the other gospels where he agonizes over what is to come, here in John Jesus notes that he is troubled but moves right on to say that what troubles his soul, his own impending death, is the reason that he has come to this hour. Then he speaks again of glory, but this time of the glory of the one he calls “Father.” In response, a voice comes from heaven – the voice of God claiming the right to glory, that is, the right to be honored, praised, and adored. Unlike the other gospels, the gospel of John has not described a voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism. In this 4<sup>th</sup> gospel it is here that the people recognize Jesus’ intimate connection to the divine. The voice is, Jesus tells them, for their benefit, not for his. Speaking of his crucifixion Jesus says, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” The ruler of this world is not a person, but rather the evil present in the world. In Jesus’ act of self-sacrifice, is the beginning of the end of the evil of this world. In looking at this text, it is important for us to know that the author of the gospel of John did not understand the cross as simply an instrument of torture. For John, theologically, the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are together Jesus’ glory. That is hard for us to understand especially because many of our old favorite hymns speak of the cross as the “dreadful curse” or an instrument of “suffering and shame.” The gospel of John portrays Jesus as choosing the cross as the end point of his mission. Just as the grain of wheat falls to the ground, dies, and grows to bear fruit, so too Jesus is lifted up, dies, and bears fruit. In Jesus’ case, that fruit is us – the people he draws to himself. So, we said a few minutes ago that the crucifixion was about death and not about death. In truth, the crucifixion is about the completion of Jesus’ mission which is the transformation of Jesus as he comes into his glory and the transformation of the world.

When Jesus calls his followers to follow him, he does not call us to literal death. Rather he calls us to be transformed as that grain of wheat is transformed – not to die, but to shed what is no longer life-giving and to grow into new life which bears fruit. This is not, for us a one-time

event, but rather a continual process of shedding what is old and growing into something new. In the language of Paul, we continually die and rise with Christ. So what might that look like?

That nursery school mother was experiencing one of the millions of little transformations which are the stuff of good parenting. In beginning the years long process of leading her little boy to independent adulthood, she was called to begin to let the role of mother as security-blanket die so that she could transform into mother of nursery school big-boy. As all of you parents know, shedding that old seed coat and growing into the new version of yourself as mother or father is never easy, though a good parent will do it over and over and over. The fruit you bear each time is that child, an adult-in-process, in his or her newly matured self at whatever stage of development.

When Jesus calls us to hate our life, he calls us to continually shed the old so that the new may become reality. Life as a follower of Jesus is a continual process of transformation, of remaking ourselves. Sometimes we are called to let go of relationships which no longer work for us or for the other, which are no longer life-giving. Whether friendships or marriages or a family relationship which is destructive, letting go allows room for us to nurture our life-giving relationships or to make new ones in which we can flourish. Sometimes what we need to let die is an old habit which keeps us from being all that God calls us to be. Habits which obstruct our ability to be productive disciples can be the usual suspects – food obsessions or chemical addictions which are unhealthy. But habits can also be things which seem positive, but really are not. We might be the most loved volunteer who never says ‘no’ when asked to take on a task. Yet that inability to set limits can leave us exhausted, resentful, and far from effective with our much too full plate. When we never say ‘no’ we are a burden to ourselves. We also become a burden to others because they know we will inevitably say ‘yes’ if asked to do something – yet they likely also know that we have more than we can handle. Others begin to feel the need to set limits for us – and become resentful of that. The call in hating our lives is to let those old habits die so that we can more effectively bear fruit. In order to bear fruit over time, knowing our own limits and setting them is essential. Some of us are called to let old attitudes and biases die. We cannot be productive disciples bearing fruit, a part of which is love of neighbor, when we harbor judgments about those who are different from us; however they are different from us.

Since we really are speaking of the Christian life as a continuous process of transformation, life stages in the Christian life must also be times when the grain falls to the ground and sprouts new growth which will bear fruit in a new way. Being of a certain age, retirement naturally comes to mind when I think of life stages. That said, the link between life-stages and transformation comes throughout – starting school, going off to college, starting out on one’s own in the world, marriage, becoming a parent, moving from worker to boss, becoming the king and queen of an empty nest, becoming grandparents, losing one’s spouse. At each life stage or event, the call is to look at ourselves, consider what changes need to happen in order for us to continue as active, faithful followers of Jesus Christ – then to let go of the old and let ourselves be transformed yet again so that we continue to bear fruit.

Ongoing transformation is part of the individual life of faith, but it is also core to the faith-life of any healthy congregation. When I arrive at a new Interim Pastorate, in short order I will usually begin a process of what I think of as ‘poking the pile.’ That is, making a variety of small changes in worship or other processes of the church in order to see if there is response and what kind of response I get. That process simply tests the waters of willingness to be transformed. Some churches react strongly even to seemingly minor changes. In one church, I decided that I, rather than the liturgist, would lead the offering – call to offering and prayer of thanksgiving. Having been a solo pastor for a number of years at that point I did not even consider that an actual change. Yet, in that particular church there was quite an uproar because normally the liturgist did that part of the service. Indeed their super sensitivity to change was going to make any amount of transformation very difficult. Here at Northminster it will not surprise you to know there was little response to my initial ‘poking the pile.’ This church is very healthy as congregations go. That health includes an openness to change – at least on the part of most – at least to some extent, for all groups have their limits. Transformation has genuinely been possible during this period of transition. As we move toward my departure and the coming of your new pastor, there is a new energy in this place. In fact, there has been a new energy for a while here at Northminster. I am excited for you all – partly because a new permanent Senior Pastor is coming soon, but mainly because of the way we have been able together to create a fresh sense of energy and direction in preparation for that arrival.

All of that said, do not think that now you can all rest on your laurels. Remember the parable of the grain of wheat, brothers and sisters. Transformation is a continuous process. That must be true for this congregation just it must be true for each of us in our individual faith lives. Congregational health and thriving in coming years are dependent upon each one of you being willing to continue to evaluate the ministry and mission that is done here at Northminster. It will be essential that each of you is open to letting that which no longer works die, even if it is a favorite mission or program for you personally. Although the new Senior Pastor is called as your permanent pastor, although the installation will be to that position, such installation does not mean being bolted to the floor in order to keep things humming as they are now. In truth if Northminster is to have the bright future to which God calls this congregation, think of him or her as your next Transformational Pastor. Whether for the individual Christian or for the body of Christ, the way to life is in continually dying and rising with Christ.