

The Strange Calculation of Lent

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Third Presbyterian Church
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John 12:20-33

Our son is a mechanical engineer. Even in high school, my ability to assist him with math homework was questionable. By the time he got to college I could barely understand the titles of his courses, let alone the content. At some point he simply and mercifully stopped trying to explain it to me.

But even the confounding complexity of his most advanced calculation cannot compare with this: “Those who love their life, lose it.” Those who love their life, lose it. Or is it that complex? It is certainly profound. And extraordinarily counter-cultural. And extremely clarifying.

Jesus’ crowds are growing and his threat to the religious and political powers is increasing. We know, just a week out from Palm Sunday, where all this will lead, even if his followers then don’t.

He moves through a progression. In this Year of Stewardship we have embraced the seed metaphor, that the seed is a gift that, when invested, when fed and nurtured and cultivated, will produce great nourishment or great beauty or great comfort. Sow your seeds faithfully, we have affirmed, and great things will happen.

But here, in the wilderness of Lent, Jesus reminds us that a seed must first die before it can grow. “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.” We know that, yet it seems so stark in the moment.

If it dies...Yet what great beauty. In the Britten piece we just heard that “the flowers are great blessings...the flower glorifies God...flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.”

To what do we need to die in order to live? To bloom? To grow? Jesus knows. He knows that his culture, and likely every culture to follow, will understand things differently. That life, we are taught and told, is about acquisition, about holding on. A zero-sum game, fear-driven, with winners and losers, haves and have-nots. Money. Access. Power. Privilege.

Yet real faith, Jesus says, and real life, authentic life, life with integrity and wholeness, is not that. We are seeds that in order to be our best and most beautiful must die. We are beloved

children of God who, rather than holding on, must let go of all that holds us back, all that entraps us, be released from our fears.

We know what that will look like for Jesus. What it looks like for us is as individual as an individual seed. Yet there is a shape, a trajectory. "Whoever serves me must follow me," Jesus says. "...and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, (God) will honor."

Maybe the math is not so hard. Maybe it's what my high school physics teacher reminded us – it all depends on what variables you put in the equation. If it is wealth and power and success, however you define success, the calculation will look like one thing. Or even if it's a version of faith that is safe and sanitized, the calculation will look like another thing.

David Lose writes that "...the point of faith in Jesus isn't just faith, or comfort, or satisfying spiritual desires. No, the point of following Jesus is that we might be drawn more deeply into the kingdom of God through our love for, service to, and sacrifice on behalf of those around us."

Is that our calculation, to follow Jesus through service in order to be drawn even more deeply, ever more closely, into the kingdom of God? If so, we know what that equation looks like, its variables, its implications, its consequences. Maybe not so calculating. But surely demanding and costly.

Janet Hunt writes: "The words of Jesus...surely have us grappling with the question of what our living and dying is for. How would you answer that question? How would we? What is our living and dying for?"

Finzi's adaptation of Crashaw's poetry asks God to "help my Faith, my Hope increase; and fill my portion in thy peace." And then this: "Give love for life."

Give love for life. Seeds are buried in the ground that they may bloom. We serve God by serving others in order that our own lives may be abundant. We lose our life in order to gain it. Jesus shows us what that looks like. Our call is simply to take the first step, then the next one, then the next, to see Jesus, and to follow, wherever he leads, even to Jerusalem, even to death, even to eternal life. Amen.

(Note: this morning's worship including choral offerings of Britten's "Rejoice in the Lamb" and "Lo, the full, final sacrifice" by Finzi.