

**“A LITTLE NERVOUS AND A LOT GRATEFUL”**  
**John 12:20-33**  
**Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**March 21, 2021**

*We had recently a rather stark reminder that winter weather is still with us. Buried under all that snow is a whole ecosystem dormant, yes, but teeming with the promise of new life. Yesterday marked the beginning of Spring and with it, the grain once buried will sprout in joyful resurrection! Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church:*

<sup>20-21</sup> There were some Greeks in town who had come up to worship at the Feast. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee: “Sir, we want to see Jesus. Can you help us?”

<sup>22-23</sup> Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip together told Jesus. Jesus answered, “Time’s up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

<sup>24-25</sup> “Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.

<sup>26</sup> “If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you’ll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment’s notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me.

<sup>27-28</sup> “Right now I am shaken. And what am I going to say? ‘Father, get me out of this’? No, this is why I came in the first place. I’ll say, ‘Father, put your glory on display.’”

A voice came out of the sky: “I have glorified it, and I’ll glorify it again.”

<sup>29</sup> The listening crowd said, “Thunder!”

Others said, “An angel spoke to him!”

<sup>30-33</sup> Jesus said, “The voice didn’t come for me but for you. At this moment the world is in crisis. Now Satan, the ruler of this world, will be thrown out. And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me.” He put it this way to show how he was going to be put to death.

*Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

It is counter-intuitive to me, a non-scientist, to allow a foreign substance to be injected into my arm, especially when it is derivative of a virus we all have tried very hard to elude for a full year prior. I have never understood why this is a good idea, though I have been vaccinated over the decades against all manner of childhood diseases, various forms of the flu, shingles, tetanus, and diphtheria. There are probably other vaccines you can think of, and I've probably had 'em.

My grandfather was a medical doctor and believe-you-me, he was a BIG fan of vaccines. Every few months, he called my parents and ordered them and the four grandchildren to his office for a shot of one thing or another. When these calls came, we hid in closets and under our beds. It was like Pavlov's response; the phone would ring, and once answered and the caller was identified to be him, we knew to make ourselves scarce.

Our older brother was fairly stoic about the whole thing. As the only boy, he had a duty to be like Jesus carrying himself to the cross and we, the disciples, were also expected to dutifully follow along. I tried to be brave, but it was a struggle. I swear my grandfather had the world's largest needles and the bedside manner of a rhinoceros. Those shots *hurt!*

The twins—Dana and Dawn—made no pretense of bravery about being vaccinated. It was terrifying to them and they fed on each other's fear, making the whole thing worse for everyone. Once they saw that we were going to Grampa's medical office, the wailing and crying started. They practically had to be dragged inside the front door and once inside, they made a beeline for the common restroom and locked the door.

Grampa always won though, and the shots were painfully administered to all our unwilling arms. Sniveling and wounded, we would pile back in the

station wagon, and trundle off with Mom and Dad to Griff's Burger Bar for our appeasement milkshake, burger and French fries.

I called my friend who is a scientist and retired Chemistry teacher. Having just had my first of two vaccine shots, I was again wrestling with why we are introducing the coronavirus into our bodies where we don't want it. She explained it to me this way:

"We aren't giving ourselves the virus. We are giving ourselves RNA that recognizes those little doodads that you see sticking out like cloves on the COVID-19 virus bulb. The RNA keeps them from dividing and multiplying and they die off."

"Oh," I replied intelligently. "Doodads I understand."

So, when I was at the Kaiser vaccination station at Briargate three weeks ago, the nurse asked me how I was feeling. I replied, "I'm a little nervous and a lot grateful." And I was both. First, I have life-long PTSD from Grampa's vaccinations. Second, I have been especially nervous about this vaccine and its possible side-effects. But I was truly grateful that I was getting in to get Shot #1 of 2. I was grateful to the volunteers and nurses working at the vaccination center on a Sunday helping people get their shots, and I was grateful at how nice they were being to everyone who came through the line. Their calm and comforting demeanor went a long way to easing my nervousness.

All the way back up from the Springs to Parker, I thought about the enormity of this effort to get the whole world protected against this killer virus. And I thought also about how this story intersects with Lent so well. Lent is a time intended by the church ancients to help us reflect on the message and method of Jesus. It is misidentified often as being about the

crucifixion, but that merciless act really comes *after* Lent and belongs in its own intercessory time and place.

Lent starts with Jesus being baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. This is God's claiming and proclaiming of Jesus as the Beloved "with whom I am well pleased." Next, Jesus has his wilderness experience—his own version of Lent, designed to test his vulnerabilities and clarify for him his pathway and purpose. The Good News is revealed to him and he emerges from his time alone immediately gathering disciples and preaching and teaching the Good News to them and others. His disciples have no pedigree except their willingness to drop their nets and working tools to follow him.

The rest of Lent in Year B, the year of Mark and John, helps us to understand the urgency with which Jesus undertakes his ministry and mission, his journey to death and resurrection. In this week's story from the Gospel of John, Andrew and Philip have come to Jesus to tell him about Greeks—Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles—who want to meet him.

Ignoring the request, Jesus finds it important that his disciples have an understanding of the meaning of this hour. Jesus illustrates his message with a short proverb: He tells them that grains of wheat must die to what they are if they are not to remain alone and fruitless. "And so it is that in a sense, human individuals must die to their love for their own lives, lest in loving themselves above all else they lose their lives and paradoxically destroy themselves." (Margaret Farley, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, 140)

What does this mean? It is Jesus' way of telling his disciples that as he is preparing to do, they must let go of their own egos and give in to the Spirit's calling. Jesus senses that he is becoming somewhat of a celebrity among the Jews and his notoriety has now reached beyond his own people into other

populations. The Zealots are offering to make him a general in their army, for they want Jesus to lead them in a revolt against the Romans. Peter and the other disciples want Jesus to claim his rightful place beside Moses and Elijah, greats of their religious tradition. And the devil offers Jesus wealth, power, and fame, if only he should give in to his ego's yearning.

All this is very tempting. Who wouldn't be impressed with the mass adoration and promises of glory?

But this is the Season of Lent, and Lent invites us to eschew ego in favor of selflessness. Perhaps we see a need to give up some habits that cause us to feed temptation rather than health. For example, during the pandemic quarantine, I have become too dependent on diet sodas and sweets. Consequently, my recent blood work showed that I have some ratcheting back to do. Time for a change in those habits.

And now that we are on the cusp of newfound freedom as a result of the vaccines, we may be tempted to break out of the doldrums in all kinds of unhealthy ways. Partying and drinking, spending money we might not have to spare in gleeful consumerism, on vacations, new cars, clothes, jewelry—anything to help us feel “normal” again—these are all our trappings and giving into them excessively is counterproductive to what Jesus says is dying to the self so that we may live.

The false illusion that we “deserve” these things is what brings us down as Lent winds down for another year. What have we learned this past 12 months about what we really need for a happy and purposeful life? Each person must answer this question for themselves. The question becomes: What grains in your life must fall to the ground and be buried so that they can sprout and reproduce as God intends? This is the way of the cross, for it is when we

prepare for and then die to our own egos that we can live into the life of discipleship that Jesus invites us to adopt.

Listen to these words from Rob Bell in his book, *Love Wins*:

Resurrection after death was not a new idea to [the people of the first century, nor to us in the twenty-first.] In the fall in many parts of the world, the leaves drop from the trees and the plants die. They turn brown, wither, and lose their life. They remain this way for the winter—dormant, dead, lifeless. And then spring comes, and they burst into life again. Growing, sprouting, producing leaves and buds. For there to be spring, there has to be a fall and then a winter. For nature to spring to life, it first has to die. Death, then resurrection. This is true for ecosystems, food chains, the seasons—it's true across the environment. Death gives way to life. A seed has to be buried in the ground before it can rise up from out of the earth as new life.

This spiritual practice of letting go may make us a bit nervous. Death makes us nervous and dying to our perceived needs no less so. Lent invites us to consider what we can let go—what can be buried—what our isolation has taught us about the essentials and non-essentials of our lives. But the tendency is fall right back into old habits, assuming we again need all of our old things and activities to be happy and whole while other things and relationships are taken for granted. As we drive our cars more and more, the air will again choke. In our eagerness to resume a social life, there may be a greater tendency to eat and drink excessively, to take more risks, and spend more money. This possibility *should* make us a bit nervous. I hope nerves give way to caution and recklessness dies to intention and discernment.

But we can be a whole lot more grateful, too—grateful that we made it through, grateful for all the dedicated, hard-working folks who helped us and served the greater good in the past year, grateful that as a church we have not only survived the pandemic, but thrived in spite of it, grateful that we have learned how to pause so that this Lent we might be more aware of the journey and less concerned with the Easter parade.

Resurrection happens. Easter will come. But first the grain must die and be buried. The renewal comes not from more ego involvement and giving in to our old ways, but with the letting go of both our self-interest and dependence on what used to be our “normal.” This Lent let us all be a little nervous and a lot grateful.

May It Be So.

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