

## **ONLY THE JOURNEY OF DYING CAN LEAD TO LIFE**

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 17, 2024

Jesus knew the path well. It was only through the journey of many deaths that true life could be found.

The Festival of the Passover was now at hand. The air was filled with much jubilation and excitement. But despite the people's festive mood, Jesus stood there on the Temple grounds somber, troubled; his mind was preoccupied; his heart was heavy.

He spoke to his dearest friends, his disciples, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." I can envision Jesus pausing in that moment, allowing his words to sink in. The twelve may have been thinking, glorification? That only occurs on the other side of death. Was Jesus saying, in some cryptic way that his death was drawing near?

The hour has come. For many months, Jesus had been saying just the opposite, that his time had not yet come. He had said it to his mother, "Woman, my time has not yet come." He said it to his brothers, "my time has not yet come." Now he was saying plainly that his time had come, the time for his glorification and the death that preceded it. The thought left them all with a deep sense of foreboding.

Then the disciple's ears really perked up when Jesus spoke his next words: "Amen, amen, I tell you." Amen, the word meant either truly, or verily. Truly, truly, I tell you. The word repeated, added great weight to what Jesus was about to say. He was telling them, listen very closely to

what I am about to say to you. The disciples immediately focused intently on Jesus' next words.

He said: "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." The disciples must have looked perplexed at these words. They may have all been thinking; what?! That was his profound truth; a grain planted into the earth producing more fruit?! Why, you don't have to be a farmer to know that grains of wheat have to die in order to sprout and multiply! How stupid does Jesus think we are?

But you see, Jesus was just warming up to his point. "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." Then Jesus spoke plainly of his pending death. He was laying out before them a deep mystery, two paths to choose. One that leads to abundant life, the other to death. But Jesus seemed to be getting it all backwards. The one path that leads to true life and fulfillment and abundance, Jesus said, is the path that is found by choosing death. And the second path, the one that should logically, in our human way of thinking, lead only to death, is instead the one that leads to life; to a fullness of life that is meant to be lived now, and on into eternity.

To the disciples that day, and to all of us – especially as Americans – this profound contradiction often runs against the grain. After all, the American dream stated clearly in the second paragraph of the first article in the Declaration of Independence reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed

by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” As American citizens, we hold these words dear; we have a right to a fullness of life that cannot be stripped away from us. We have a right to freedom that cannot be taken away. We have a right to happiness that we should fight for. And yet, Jesus seems to flip this line guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence on its head! He tells us, you want to have life – then choose the path of self-renunciation and death. You want to have freedom – well then, surrender your life like that of a slave to others.

Jesus lived out this contrary way to live, a way that he calls us to follow. It is stated in the scriptures, in the letter to the church in Philippi. We are told this: “You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God,...he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being...he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor.” Jesus showed many examples of this path of downward mobility, of a path towards self-sacrifice and death. On that last meal together, while as their Lord and master, he became a servant to them and washed their feet. Jesus always did what was not best for him, but was best for others.

“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.” One of the many followers of Jesus Christ who lived this sacrificial life, was a man named Patrick. Tradition says that he died on March 17<sup>th</sup> towards the end of the fifth century. He was born most likely in Scotland. At the age of 16 he was

captured by Irish pirates who took him bound to the Emerald Isle and sold him as a slave.

Six years later he finally made his escape and began the arduous journey home. He recounts a vision he had a few years later: "I saw a man coming, as it were from Ireland. His name was Victoricus, and he carried many letters, and he gave me one of them. I read the heading: 'The Voice of the Irish'. As I began the letter, I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people...and they cried out, as with one voice: 'We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us.'" Patrick's vision seemed to be calling him back to the very place where he had been held bound and enslaved. It seemed to be a hard calling to follow. And yet, because Patrick had already sold himself as a slave to Jesus Christ; had already been planted as a kernel in the earth to die, he said yes, and followed God's call to return as a missionary to Ireland, where he eventually became a bishop.

Our society frequently teaches us to seek out what is best for us; to seek prosperity and success. To climb the corporate ladder. To stand up for our rights. To seek the path of life. But Jesus is calling us to follow him on a different path. When our fears and insecurities get the better of us and hold us back from taking risks, we choose the path of self-renunciation and take the risk. When, on the other hand, we are tempted to stand firm, immovable in whatever position we hold to, we follow Jesus' way of humility and self-sacrifice, and yield our ground. We are called in this life, time and time and time again – to a path of downward mobility, a path of self-renunciation and self-sacrifice and humility. No, this doesn't always mean that we act as a doormat to others. Sometimes this downward way is a way of standing up to others and speaking our truth.

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