

The Promise of Bearing Fruit

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

John 12: 20-33

March 29, 2009

United Memorial

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

This is a wonderful time of year...

The hour has come... winter has finally come to an end.

Some very hardy gardeners are outside again, helping to prepare the way for the new plants of spring and summer.

The old brown grass is being raked away, ground cover is being removed and blades of green grass are appearing everywhere.

The hour has come when life and death are side by side as the old makes way for new life and new growth.

So too, the hour has come in our scripture readings, to hear stories in scripture of God's steadfast love promising and working to bring new life out of death.

Now our first reading tells us of a time about 580 years before Christ in the land of Judah...when the prophet Jeremiah walked the land.

Now Jeremiah had fire in his bones... he was a great speaker.

Jeremiah prophesied that the temple would be destroyed and the people would be taken into captivity.

And those things did happen.

But then Jeremiah stood on top of the rubble of Jerusalem and preached that the disaster the people were experiencing was an entryway to a new life.

He told everyone to take heart.

He proclaimed that although they had disobeyed the Law of Moses again and again...

God was going to forgive the people... give them a second change.

The hour had come.

God would make a new covenant with the people... and write God's covenant on their hearts.

Imagine!

You see, the old written law of Moses, which aside from the Ten Commandments, included 567 laws to govern daily living.

They hadn't worked.

Jeremiah preached that God was aware of some loopholes in the old covenant.

Written laws could give someone the idea that all he or she has to do is memorize them, or live them without ever discerning what is at the heart of God's covenant.

Written laws could confuse someone into believing that one could make promises before God and keep one's fingers crossed behind the back.

And so, Jeremiah told the people God's new covenant would be put within the people... and written on their hearts.

This time there would be no need for temples or texts.

People would know God by heart.

Not just know about God, or hear about God, or feel guilty or obey out of fear.

God's living word and promise would be within the people.

The people would know God so intimately that they would naturally and without hesitation do God's will.

And so the hour had come for a new covenant... and a new relationship between God and God's people.

So too in our gospel reading Jesus tells the disciples and the crowd which followed him that the hour has come for him to reveal the glory of God's love.

This statement surely falls heavily on our ears... just as it did on the crowd almost 2000 years ago.

The crowd cries back, "How can you say that Jesus? How can you say the son of man must be lifted up on a cross to die?"

Jesus replies, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

A grain of wheat? Much fruit?

I think that Jesus is telling us that if we do everything in our power to protect our lives the way they are... if we successfully prevent change, prevent conflict, prevent pain... then at the end we will find that we had no life at all.

But if we risk opening our hearts to God so that God can write God's new covenant on our hearts... we will see and hear the suffering of the world.

And our hearts will be cracked open like sprouting seed...willing to respond fully with compassion and generosity of Spirit... with the love of Christ in our living.

A grain of wheat cannot grow unless it dies.

That is how Jesus put it.

If we encase it in plastic and hang it around our neck, it will never be anything but a decoration.

For the seed to do what it was meant to do, it has to be given up.

It has to fall into the earth and buried until its hour comes and it will swell, crack and hatch new life... a green blade rising until it becomes wheat bearing much fruit.

The seed will be gone... but in dying, shoots of wheat and many more seeds in the world are possible.

If Jesus had saved his life, gone on a speaking tour, written some books, toned down his message, stopped criticizing the local authorities and generally kept quiet, there is no telling how long his message may have lived.

But God's covenant was written fully on Jesus' open and willing heart... Jesus was willing to lose the safety and security of his life...

His message of God's love and forgiveness was written so deeply on his heart... and meant so much to him ...that he was willing to show people what it meant ... instead of just telling us about it.

Jesus was willing to be the seed... to reveal fully God's love and promise of eternal love and life.

Because Jesus was willing to die, people could discover that death was not the worst thing that could happen to them.

Because Jesus was willing to die, a new community could form in his name, one that redefined the meaning of life, and God's power and presence in life, death and life beyond death.

Jesus asks us to risk an open and willing heart... to see, to hear, to feel, to respond to the pain and suffering of the world.

In his name, we are asked to risk going beyond what is familiar, even comfortable.

We may never fully see the results of generosity or kindness in the community, through the food bank or Christmas baskets.

We may never know how we helped create community through conversations over coffee or meetings on the street.

We may never know how a person's life will be affected by an invitation to come and worship, to join in making music or gather over a potluck lunch.

We may never see pictures of the children and families our contributions help in lands far away. But the seed is planted... and in God's good time, the hour comes for the green blades to rise and bear much fruit.

May this be our hour ... for the green blade to rise... to open our hearts to God's love and grace... so that the seed will continue to be sown... and the mystery and power God's love will continue to be at work in the world, drawing all of us into a closer relationship with God and one another.

To God be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

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