

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Jeremiah 31: 31-34; John 12: 20-26
“I Believe...We Trust: That God Is At Work in Hidden Places”
5th Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2015

In the Gospel according to John, the storm clouds of Jesus’s death begin to hover on the narrative horizon quite early. By the time we reach today’s Scripture lesson which takes place in Jerusalem as crowds of people throng the city streets for the festival of the Passover, the storm clouds have mushroomed into massive thunderheads of opposition against Jesus. The atmosphere is foggy with confusion and suspicion as the stage curtains open on this scene.

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Friday was the first day of spring. It didn’t look like it and it didn’t feel like it...drizzly, bone-chilling day that it was, made gloomier when the Davidson Wildcats had to relinquish their March Madness dance card at the end of the night.

But yesterday. Ah, yesterday.

Yesterday was a glorious turning point. It was a turning point from winter into spring.

Three weeks ago, we were slogging through winter, soothing each other’s weather weariness with lackluster bromides like “Well, at least we don’t live in Boston.” Today, spring is bustin’ out all over as the forsythia blooms and the cherry trees bud. The birds are chirping as they build nests in trees and in bushes, singing a promise of new life.

The verses that we have read from John’s gospel mark a climactic turning point in the seasons of Jesus’s life. Jesus marks this change of seasons with the words, recorded in verse 23, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus has been making references to “the hour,” saying time and again that his hour has not yet come. When his mother pulled on the coattails of Jesus’s Son of God tuxedo at the wedding in Cana, whispering in his ear that he really should head back to the kitchen and give the caterer a hand with the wine, he says “my hour has not yet come.” When, in John 7, leaders attempt to arrest Jesus, but fail, it is “because his hour had not yet come.” In John 8, the narrator explains that Jesus could not be arrested because his hour had not yet come.

But in the passage that has just been read, the situation turns on a dime. Abruptly, everything has changed. Jesus’s hour has come.

What follows is a sermon. The sermon is a story. An anecdote, if you will. A parable.

It goes this way: 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 general meaning of the story sermon that Jesus tells is clear: Jesus is speaking of his own death as a means to life.

But this little sermon also points to other meanings beneath the surface. It sets us to thinking about how God often brings about turning points in hidden spaces, in the inner being, in the secret heart.

There is a gentle irony in this, isn’t there?

Consider, if you will, how much media chatter there has been in recent weeks about the private and public emails of elected and appointed officials...not just on the level of presidential candidates, but in our local tabloids too, the assumption being that we're all better off if everything is out there in the glare of day, open to public scrutiny. And all of us would agree, I think, that there is certainly something to be said for decision-making in the sunshine when it comes to serving the public interest.

But when it comes to the work of God, Jesus's parabolic sermon points us to the truth that there is work that God needs to do in us that can only be done in secret, out of sight, away from the glare of day, removed from public view.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke of this in today's Old Testament reading when he quoted God as saying, "I will put my law within people, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

This is good news for us especially when we find ourselves feeling isolated, friendless, besieged by doubt, when our spiritual life seems dormant, when we feel dead inside, when our joy is drowned by sorrow.

At one of the small group Lenten studies held this past week, Katie McCloy shared with the group something that Martha Graham, the renowned dancer and choreographer, wrote about what she called "a blessed unrest": "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you...if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost...It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep the channel open."

In other words, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies...unless we keep the channel open in the hidden, prayerful spaces of our lives as Jesus himself did...we will remain a single, isolated grain.

But if we keep the channel open...as Mary did, pondering how the life growing inside of her would be born to save the world, as Jesus himself did, dying as a means to gaining new life...if we keep the channel open, the promise is true: having drawn us deep inside, God will draw then us back into the world to bear the fruit that comes when our inner lives are congruent with our outer ones. We will be reborn, resurrected, transformed, made new and, by God's grace, enabled to bear fruit which enables others to be reborn, resurrected, and made new.

The sermon that Jesus preached a couple of millennia ago made use of images his audience knew well: grain, soil, seeds.

However, the world is full of contemporary parables and sermons which open up the mystery of how God draws people deep inside and then draws them back outside to bear fruit. And, with this being the first weekend of March Madness, I couldn't close this sermon without telling a modern-day parable involving basketball. It involves two high school basketball teams: one from Gainesville, Texas, and the other from Waco.

GAINESVILLE, Texas -- If you're a fan of high school basketball, you're not alone. But if you're a fan of the Gainesville Tornados in Gainesville, Texas then you are alone. "Usually our fan base was close to zero," said one Gainesville player. "My parents came to one game but they didn't come to the other ones because they didn't have time," said another.

The other students at Gainesville - a juvenile correction facility for felony offenders - don't come to the games either, mostly because they can't get out. One of the few perks at the facility - for very good behavior - is a chance to leave the prison a few times a year to play basketball

They play against private schools like Vanguard College Prep in Waco. And it was before that recent match-up that two Vanguard players - Hudson Bradley and Ben Martinson - announced they weren't going to play against a team with no fans. "No one likes playing in an empty gym," said Martinson. Bradley told me it "doesn't seem right" to play a team with no fans, regardless of the advantage it may give his own team. So before their home game against Gainesville, Bradley and Martinson asked some Vanguard fans for a favor: To cheer for Gainesville instead. The Gainesville players had no idea what was happening. They walked onto the court to find their own signs of support, their own cheerleaders, even their own fan section. Half the crowd was assigned to cheer for Gainesville. But as the game went on, everybody started to cheer for Gainesville

"I mean every time they scored the gym was just lit up with cheering and clapping and everyone was on their feet," said Bradley. "I think in a way this is kind of how sports should be. It just kind of showed me the real impact that encouragement and support for anybody can make." Bradley says we all need someone to believe in us. We all need someone who knows our mistakes and loves us anyway. And for that, the Gainesville players can't thank those boys enough. "When I'm an old man I'll still be thinking about this," said one Gainesville player. And finally, as for who won the game, well, obviously they didn't care - so why should we? (1)

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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.

Brothers and sisters, may God be at work in the hidden places of your life and my life, so that we may bear the fruit of love, grace, mercy, and encouragement for one another.

1. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/texas-high-school-basketball-team-incredible-sportsmanship/>