

March 21, 2021

For Goodness Sake

Text: John 12: 22-30

Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. ‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

Sermon:

Right now in this very church, did you know that we have six different adult studies taking place? There is one that focuses on mindfulness and meditation; there is another that looks at the text that we use each week in worship. There are two more that are looking at the concept of *covenant*—this idea we’ve been talking about with the kids each week during Children’s Time. And there’s one more focused on engaging daily readings from a wide variety of authors and perspectives. And the final one is tackling this Holy Book—going from Genesis all the way to Revelation.

Each of them are small groups of intrepid faith folk, coming together mostly on Zoom to encounter, to wrestle with and to discover and share truths old and new. In that last group that is reading the Bible from cover to cover, we finally made our way up to Proverbs a couple weeks ago. And when we gathered in that group, at first I wasn’t sure what to expect. What I found was a group full of joy and surprise. They found great joy in those pithy, sometimes serious and often humorous phrases, always with meaning.

- Mindy found resonance in a couple of them in terms of how she is coping with this pandemic.
- Susan found unexpected joy from this wisdom that had been recorded about how to live a more full life.
- Marilyn kept being astounded by how these proverbs touched on her deep and deepening, voluminous knowledge of the Bible and her practice of faith.
- Patty said she was dreading the week a little bit, fearing that proverbs would be all about lecturing us in what we shouldn’t do, and instead she found the proverbs about leading and where we might go.

Try this one on: “Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting in strife.” Who hasn’t been there in a family gathering? Or this one: “A soft answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger”—something that it would be well for all of us to remember in those

moments of conflict. Or what about this one, “Speak out for those who cannot speak.” Speak out—defend the rights of the poor and the needy are high callings to remember here in Lent. To be fair, some of the proverbs need to be adapted so that their truth can speak to us in these different times. Some of them use ageless humor to tackle tough topics. They weave metaphor and imagery, often bringing a little chuckle to challenges that might otherwise overwhelm us. In our studies, it was easier to laugh when the proverb highlighted the trials or shortcomings of someone else. Then the wisdom of it all entered our hearts unfettered.

I don’t know if it was because of the time allotted for the study—only an hour and a half, or maybe because of the format with each of us separate on our Zoom screens, but as I look back, we didn’t closely examine any proverb that quipped wittily to challenge our own being or doing in those tough places where we know we need to be challenged. Rather when we talked about the proverbs that came to mind, we rejoiced with the cleverness that spoke to things we felt were problems or the beauty in which other proverbs helped to lift our spirits.

What we all found, though, was that with such a wealth of teachings in Proverbs, the critical challenge is the wisdom to know when to use which one—in what moment and to what end? Had we been in each other’s company—had we talked longer, I believe we would have worked our way into and through a proverb that spoke to one or many of us in ways that brought up stress, even if we knew it was true and was something that we needed to face—even if we knew it brought trouble to our souls, even if we knew we could no longer run away but had to face it if there was to be transformation.

In today’s reading, Jesus was surrounded by those who loved him. He was keenly aware of the truth of the situation and knew all too well how the events that were unfolding would relate personally to him. And so in this moment of joy, Jesus unleashed his own pithy proverb. You need to know the context for the story that Shirley read today. You need to know that in John’s Gospel, Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead. And the crowds that came to mourn Lazarus were now clamoring for the joy and life that Jesus offers. Word was getting out and the Jewish people were following his every move. In the verse before Shirley started reading, it said that even the Greeks are coming—which is to say all others, pagans, Hellenists, and outsiders. The outsiders are seeking Jesus out. This setting takes place just days before the great festival of Passover—the remembrance of deliverance of people from another evil empire.

In a weird twist of the church calendar, the lectionary gives us this reading for today, even though this reading immediately follows (and does not precede) John’s account of the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem that we will mark next week with palms. I’ve got to imagine that the disciples are all thinking the same thing—that surely their moment has arrived, vindication is at hand, and Jesus leans into it; he stokes it; he says the time has come for glory. His glory is at hand, and then he follows such a statement of anticipation with something that must have made their jaws drop. He follows with a proverb—a pithy statement—but one that doesn’t appear anywhere in scripture or even within the whole Bible. It is a statement about planting and growing; it is perfect for spring.

It is a statement that we Christians often throw around—that unless that grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it cannot grow; and we throw it around with such joy perhaps because it

always seem to apply somewhere *out there*—somewhere else. So in another church, another people, another situation, you might hear, “Remember folks, if that grain of wheat doesn’t fall, it can’t grow...” But in this reading, Jesus isn’t projecting this pithy proverb on anyone. He says it both about himself and the nature of all this glory that John’s Gospel is obsessed with—this glory that he is about to reveal. He says this truth that a seed cannot grow if it clings to being that seed, if it stays in the sheltered protection of that outer covering, it does remain a seed, but it never becomes what it might be. It only grows when it is planted, when it gives itself up to become something else—willing to let go of what it is to become something better. And it’s not just for itself but to bear fruit for others.

Friends, here we are five Sundays later, still abiding in that wisdom that Anna offered about the nature of pilgrimage on the first Sunday of Lent. Do you remember that part of this idea of pilgrimage is letting go of being that we might become. There are tough words in this passage that sometimes sounds more like that lecture that Patty was afraid of—*Lose your life*, Jesus says. *Hate your life*, Jesus says. Well, at least that’s how the NRSV translates it. But it came to me in this past week thinking about it that maybe those statements are part of the proverb too, providing more imagery and more material to evoke.

I want to read to you what the *Message* translation of this passage places on the lips of Jesus: “*In the same way anyone who holds onto life just as it is—destroys that life, but if you let it go, reckless in your love—you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.*” It sounds more leading than lecturing—doesn’t it? And this is no throwaway; Jesus makes it clear in the following verses that life is precious, his own included.

From that opening prologue in John’s Gospel, there is never a moment when we are left in doubt that Jesus is God. Jesus is divine; Jesus is holy. Here in this verse and many others in the Gospel of John, there is powerful truth that Jesus loves his body and doesn’t want it to be crucified; Jesus loves his life, and he loves these people! That’s why he raised Lazarus; he loves this whole thing that we do together. Jesus has been planting seeds and watching them grow for a long time. But you notice that in this verse, Jesus mentions his *soul* is troubled. He is weighed down; this is a lot even for Jesus.

He articulates it in such a way that sounds like, “Hey God! Let it pass! Let someone else take care of it.” Let this proverb apply to those over there and not here—something we all have done. And yet as hard as it is; as tough as it is, Jesus takes this proverb and he owns it. Not just so that he might face those moments but that we might face ours now too, 2000 years later. We too who love this bodily thing called life, this connection, family, and all the beauty, meaning and truth that often tags along with it.

We’ve been so used to hanging on and to holding on for so long in this pandemic, haven’t we? We’ve been guarding what is and how we be for the possibility of newness, and it seems so close. In these moments of becoming, where do we need to be reckless with love? What sure thing are we gripping that needs to be released for something better—not just for us but for those whose backs are up against the wall to bear fruit for others—and to become what we might yet be. Friends, Jesus doesn’t have to be God or prescient or all knowing to recognize what’s coming next after this festival and after these crowds keep clamoring and growing. For we all know

when you step out of bounds, especially if it's for something that's deeply good—when you step up against the powers that be, especially when you are calling for that power to be more freely shared—when you call out for love and connection to overcome the use of fear and division—we all know what happens and how power responds—and the very real danger that goes with it. Armed with that knowledge, we are tempted all the time to ask, “What should we say, God?” God of Love, save us from this hour! I think not. Like Jesus, we need to wade in.

A more contemporary proverb on the lips of Bette Midler, found in the song the *Rose* sums it all up this way for me, “*It's the one afraid of being taken that never learns to give; it's the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live.*” Friends in John's Gospel, there is talk about glory or glorifying some 26 times. As early as the incarnation it says that that is so that we might get a glimpse of God's glory. That miracle of turning 132 gallons of water into wine is where we get to *taste* that glory. There is glory all over the place but where most of it focuses and where the ultimate revelation of it focuses comes in a way that a proverb can barely sum up. When Jesus says, “I am ready to be lifted in glory,” he means being lifted on that cross, letting go of all the beautiful things he is and has done, for what might yet become—not carelessly, because he knows how precious life is. And he has not just been letting go in this passage but in his whole living—his whole journey and how one life can be a gift for another—how one life can bring abundance, and how one life can stay up like he did with Nicodemus, engaging the curious that they might learn. One life might feed multitudes, like the thousands who came out to follow him. One life like his can heal and welcome and share, not by holding onto but by always setting out and giving away.

Jesus was well aware not just of this precious seed, not just in his hands but in his life. He planted that seed everywhere he went and he knows that finally he was about to let that seed of his ultimately be transformed, and he knows that it is going to be hard, and he also knows that he can. Friends, he is about to be placed on the ultimate symbol of pain and humiliation—the cross. It was by the cross the powers of earth and evil and empire poured out their might against this humble servant. It was on that cross that death will come to him agonizingly so; it is on that cross that the seed planted in Christ will be transformed and everything along with it. The cross becomes a symbol of hope and light; the cross is a reminder of true power; the cross is the location where death loses. Yesterday, friends, when we were cleaning up the lawn and getting ready for Easter, I found this symbol of the cross on the ground. Do you remember? It was from Advent and it was hanging on the trees that someone had decorated. It's about that mystery of how is it possible for something like this cross to be converted into a sign of joy?

Jesus knew he carried a seed within his being; he knew how to share it recklessly in love because he knew how ultimately powerful that seed can be. So my question is: what seed do you carry? How do you need to get a bit more reckless in your love sharing so you might plant yours? How can you live so abundantly and truly so that when, like Jesus, you come face to face with the fact that time is short or that demands on you are insurmountable, you know that you have already lived fully and you are ready to let go one last time to be fully transformed.

John's Gospel ends in another way of glory, with the call of Peter to serve and also with Jesus' honest telling of Peter where it will take him. We all are so uplifted that Peter the denier ultimately answers three times, instead “I love you and I will go and serve,” and yet the end of

John's Gospel doesn't end on that high note; it ends on a higher one. Jesus says to Peter, you will stretch out your hands, and they will lead you and take you where you do not want to go—in fact literally to his own cross. When Jesus finishes telling Peter where his path will end, he looks Peter in the eye and simply says, "Come and follow me." And Peter does, doing miraculous, amazing, mysterious and unbelievable while he lives, that this church might grow out of it. The choice for us today is will we too? Will we seek glory?

The Book of Proverbs mentions glory only once. It is in Chapter 25, verse two. It says that the glory of God is to be found in mystery—in places like the cross that defy our understanding, and the task of you and me and kings and all who live is to search out and find it, no matter where it takes us, even to impossibly surprising places like the cross, for in the transformed cross, friends, peace is there that knows no measure—and joys that through all time—yes eternally—will abide.

Amen.

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