

Fifth Sunday in Lent

A GRAIN OF WHEAT

John 12:20-33

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

20Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24Very 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. 25Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27"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. 28Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Introduction: The buzz of "the crowd that had been with (Jesus)"

when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead" (John 12:17) had some life. It wouldn't die. To kill it, the chief priests, infuriated because "many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus" (John 12:11), planned to put Jesus to death—and Lazarus as well.

Then, on Palm Sunday the crowds went crazy over the one who raised Lazarus, much to the exasperation of the Pharisees who bemoaned, "Look, the world has gone after him!" (John 12:19), which included some Greek-speaking Jews.

Now comes the turning point in John's gospel, much as in Matthew 16:21, Mark 8:31, and Luke 17:25, where Jesus answers, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (v. 23), a clear reference to his death and resurrection. By raising Lazarus, Jesus has sealed his own death, which, paradoxically, will make him the source of life. Likewise, Jesus says that those who follow him will suffer the same fate—and have "eternal life" (v.25), the truth buried in the story of a grain of wheat.

DIAGNOSIS: A Single Grain...

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Alone, By Itself...*
"I've got to be me!" shouts an angry assertive teenager. Another cries, "Poor me." Both, in their attempts to stand alone, whether by self-affirmation or self-abnegation, are on slippery ground, as we all easily slide into living solely for and by ourselves. Unquestionably, we are all part of the "Me Generation," using and abusing others, survival our number one aim in life, to the exclusion of others and the ruin of community. Standing alone, we are vulnerable to planting seeds that have no future.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Refusing to Die...*

In the lesson Jesus warns against such planting, pointing out that when a seed remains alone it remains lifeless. Refusing to get out of ourselves, a kind of bondage to begin with, we have no one to love and trust except ourselves, as even God would be turned into our pawn. Loving our life more than God, unable to offer our life to God or our neighbor, we are doomed to live for ourselves, which is already death. And so, a seed, turned inward, that refuses to die, is still lifeless.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Is Wasted, Lost*

A single grain, unable to sustain its own life, unable to offer its life, becomes fruitless waste. The “tree of life” (Gen. 2:9) in the garden became the tree of death, when the man and the woman disobeyed God, who “cursed...the ground” with thorns and thistles (Gen 2:17-18). Jesus’ story about the fruitless fig tree (Luke 13:3-9) is a warning that by wasting the ground we deserve to be cut down. Having no substance beyond ourselves, failing to use the life graciously given to us, never entering the ground in repentance and renewal to live again, we become a wasteland, nothing kept “for eternal life” (v. 25).

PROGNOSIS: If It Dies...

Step 4: Final Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *It Gets Buried and Lives...*

Worthless, lifeless grains, left to ourselves, we end up being “trampled on” (Luke 8:5), a death to no avail. We have no hope unless, as Jesus made abundantly clear, he would be planted into the ground, “lifted up” (John 3:15) on the tree of the cross, and then “lifted up from the earth” (v. 32) in the harvest of his resurrection, drawing all people to himself. He is the seed that gets planted into the ground, the One, who was “crucified, died, and was buried, (who) descended to the dead,...(and) on the third day he rose again,” becoming “the eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb. 5:9). Jesus would love God and us more

than his own life, would take our death which he did not deserve and give us his life which we did not deserve. For that he is “glorified” (v. 28), and the “eternal life” (v. 25) which he keeps by rising for the dead, he gives to us. How fruitful is that!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Gets Transformed...

Following him, then, means that the servant takes on the image of her Lord, by a dying and rising, as she gets “a new and free spirit” (Ps. 51:10). The grains of wheat that we are, who believe in him, get to die and rise with him, transformed by our baptism, where our sinful gets drowned (buried) in his death, when we become a new self, emerging in his likeness. The grains of wheat that we are, who believe in him, we get to feed off him in the Eucharist, the Bread of Life, transformed into new beings, alive and whole as he is. Any death that we suffer that looks like his is destined to turn out like his, a resurrection from the dead. St. Paul, when he was facing death, wrote that “while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4:11). He then went on to write, “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16), a grain of wheat transformed.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Bearing Fruit

So, in Jesus our losses become our gains, as we follow him, suffering through repentance, bearing the judgment of the world, overcoming the evil one (v. 31), drawn to the one who was “lifted up” (v. 32), the resurrected and ascended One, the Grain who is now more than one. We have become the community of Jesus, bread for the world, light in the darkness (John 12:35-36), losing our life for his sake, for the world’s sake, never wasting, always growing and bearing the fruits of peace and joy

and hope, signs to the world of the never-ending story that a seed planted into the ground and then dying saves the world.