

5th Lent Year 'B'
March 20-21, 2021

The grain of wheat.

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

Have you ever found yourself at a loss for words or tried to understand something so diligently, yet simply could not seem to make any sense of it whatsoever? The words of Jesus in today's Gospel present such an opportunity. We may try to explain them away, but you will come up short. "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." This is a real head scratcher!

The gist of the parable is rather straightforward. A seed falls to the ground and is buried, seemingly dead, until it sprouts and grows. Among the rabbis of the time, the grain of wheat was repeatedly used as a symbol of the final resurrection of the dead.¹ St. Paul himself uses it in his first Letter to the Corinthians, describing "what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel of wheat..."² If the grain, which is bare and laid in the ground is able to rise again, how much more so will we who are clothed in the righteousness of the Lord be able to rise in glory?

This parable is placed within the context of Jesus' prophecies of his own passion, so the mention of death is most understandable. But then, we come to the line about 'hating' and 'loving' our life. Which is better? Surprise—it is not what we would expect! The antithesis of 'love' and 'hate' is a Semitic idea and not unique to this biblical passage. Recall, we were told to 'hate' our father and mother. It's not to be interpreted literally.

Today's parable places the disciple— that's us—straight away in the face of death. It is doing so with the paradoxical law that death can mean life. Therefore, in this context 'hatred' can in reality signal love.

¹ Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of John*, vol. II, page 383 (New York: Crossroads, 1982)

² 1 Corinthians 15:36-37 You fool! What you sow is not brought to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be but a bare kernel of wheat, perhaps, or of some other kind

Commenting on this passage, a prominent German Scripture scholar from last century noted:

“The saying about loving and hating life is attached directly to Jesus’ own sacrifice of his life, and shows the disciple that for him too, death is not the end, but the perfection of true life.”³

The word ‘hates’ here ought to be understood as a Hebrew phrase meaning to ‘love less,’ and not the sinful hatred that we may immediately presume. The grain of wheat left to itself, does nothing—only when it is buried—appearing to be dead, does it spring up and produce fruit.

The more I may believe that I'm going to live my life as if there were no tomorrow, the more I can be assured that my tomorrow's will fall flat. I recall seeing a bumper sticker on the car in front of me. It read simply, “Trust no one.” Talk about angst and anger! While it may have been a joke, it strikes me as the essence of a sterile and impoverished existence.

Where would we be in life without trust? We would be empty, pensive, always questioning other’s motives. Jesus promised us that he would draw all people to himself. He experienced both his humanity and divinity. In his humanity, he was troubled. He saw that the end was approaching.

The invitation to discipleship means readiness to face the reality of death. “Hating one's own life” means the willingness to lay down one's life for the sake of the name of Jesus. Parents understand this instinctively, much better than do I. Mothers, many of whom work outside of the home, still manage to accomplish all of the many tasks in the home.

Certainly, fathers are pitching in, but the reality is that multi- tasking is commonplace in today's households. Parents withhold various amenities in their own lives, all in order to provide for their children. Modern parenthood lived well is the essence of laying down one's life.

³ Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of John*, vol. II, page 384 (New York: Crossroads, 1982)

Following Jesus on the road to Calvary means that we follow him all throughout our lives. We do not vacillate in our relationship with the Lord. We have made a commitment to him until that day when he calls us home, to our true home. And not a moment sooner!

As we approach the homestretch this long journey of Lent, may we see the value to all the seemingly insignificant 'deaths' we experience—the death to our comforts, our wants and our desires—for now we can truly live, freed from all of the cares which hold us captive.