

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Rev. Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 29, 2009 Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12: 20-33

Dying to Live

Do you know about the instincts of salmon? A salmon has an instinct inside of it, which brings it back to the place of its birth. After spending a year or two or three out in the ocean it swims thousands of miles back up to the stream where it was born. This is how the salmon prepare to die.

They come back to the place of their hatching, being driven over rocks and dams and waterfalls. They finally at the end of their long laborious journey, dig a hole, lay their eggs and they die. And out of those eggs comes new life – the next generation.

For it is ONLY through dying that there is new life among the salmon. It's the same for Christians. In our reading from John this morning, Jesus speaks of his dying and rising.

It has not been long since he raised Lazarus from the dead – still wrapped in grave cloths and smelling four days of death, Lazarus stumbled out of the tomb and into the waiting arms of his sisters and friends. Now that life is getting back to normal (although I wonder if life can ever be normal after somebody is raised from the dead), we might expect the focus to turn to the impending feast of Passover.

But even that greatest of festivals cannot hold a candle to the Light of the World, who has, after all, just brought his friend from death to life with only a heavenward glance and the strength of his voice.

That is precisely what bothers the Pharisees. They and the rest of the religious establishment are powerless against this man who claims to have come from the Father in heaven.

Already many of the Jews are believing in him. And the Pharisees fear that before too long, everyone will follow after him, causing the Romans to come and destroy their temple and the nation and strip them of their authority. Their worst fears are confirmed when the crowds who had been at Lazarus' tomb begin to testify to Jesus great power and authority. "Look," the Pharisees exclaim, like the representatives of a failed ad campaign, "the world has gone after him and away from us!"

The world is focused on Jesus to such an extent that even some Greeks are anxious to lay eyes on him. And so they engage in a little first-century social networking with the disciple with the

Greek name, Philip, a person whom Jesus had "friended" near the start of his earthly ministry. And it is no wonder they want to see Jesus. After all, he has been inviting folks to "come and see" from the very beginning.

Plus, there is the matter of all those signs – the raising of Lazarus is only the most recent. It is easy to imagine how seeing water turned to wine or a man given his sight would lead people to believe in and follow One who can do such things. Seeing is believing in this Gospel, so when the Greeks ask to see Jesus, they are, perhaps, expressing their desire to believe. Whether they are successful in meeting Jesus we don't know, but Jesus' response to them refocuses the terms of the discussion.

No longer is it enough to come and see Jesus; from "this hour" forward his followers are invited to come and be with Jesus.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus invites his disciples to "follow me," and he promises the "light of life" to those who do follow. However, on more than one occasion, he tells some of "the Jews" that they cannot come where he is going. Later during this Passover festival, he will say the same thing to his disciples.

Still, it is clear that a time will come when they will be able to follow him. He even says that he will go first "and prepare a place for you," and then "come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may also be."

Making it possible for his followers to be together with him seems to be a core purpose of Jesus' ministry, as he prays to God that "I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am."

So where is Jesus? Or better put, where isn't he?

He is with the Father, and he dwells among us.

He is leading his followers to eternal life as he moves toward the hour of his death. Before much longer he will be "lifted up" on the cross where he will lay down his life for his friends.

We read today that, even as a grain of wheat falls to the earth in order to fulfill its true purpose, Jesus is lifted up from the earth in order to fulfill his, so that he may draw all people to himself. And it is there, at the cross, that we will see his glory.

Following Jesus is a matter of life and death.

Or, to put it another way, life and death matter to those who follow Jesus.

During this season of Lent we follow him all the way to Golgotha, all the way to the cross. It is there, in the face of the world's many ways of death (poverty, economic collapse, hunger, sickness, war) that we are drawn even closer to Jesus. It is there, in the light of the stark reality of life at its end, that we begin to catch a glimpse of life at its fullest.

Jesus promises, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (12:32). It is for such a time as this that Jesus has brought us to this hour. There is nothing like impending death to focus our attention. (Audrey West)

In preparation for the sermon for today, a pastor in Iowa wanted to find out what happened to seeds when they are planted into the ground and die and so he did some research. This is what happened.

First he called the Dunn Seed Company, figuring they would know about seeds. So he telephoned them and said: "This is Pastor Markquart from Grace Lutheran Church in Des Moines. I am working on a sermon for this Sunday about seeds and you people are experts about seeds. I read in the Bible that Jesus said that when a seed dies, it bears much fruit. Can you tell me what happens to a seed when it is planted, that is, when it dies?"

The clerk on the other end of the telephone line said, "(Long pause) That is one of the wonders of nature. Let me have you talk to my boss." So the boss got on the phone, and he said to the boss, "My name is Pastor Markquart; I am preaching a sermon about seeds. Jesus said that unless a seed dies, it remains only one seed; but when a seed dies, it bears many seeds. Can you tell me what happens when a seed dies? I need to know. "

The boss said, "That is quite a philosophical question. The way I have it figured out is this. In every seed there is a cell of diatron, which is filled with chlorophyll, and all seeds have little chlorophyll in them. For me, that's the soul.

There is cabbage chlorophyll (a cabbage soul). There is carrot chlorophyll, a carrot soul. There is asparagus chlorophyll, asparagus soul. And we, as human beings, have chlorophyll, the human soul; and if you want to live, you have chlorophyll. But I really don't know the answer to your question, so I suggest that you call Dr. David Gibbs who has a Ph.D. in plant physiology at the University.

So he telephoned Dr. Gibbs and gave him the same introduction and question, "My name is Pastor Markquart. I am preaching a sermon about Christ. The key to the sermon is this: Unless a seed dies, it remains a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds and therefore much fruit. Can you tell me what happens when a seed dies?"

The professor finally had the right answer. Perhaps it helps to have a Ph.D. in plant physiology. He said that inside every seed is an embryo, and in that embryo is a root, which goes down into the ground; and a shoot that goes up into the sky. Every embryo has a root and a shoot; and inside that little embryo, (and this is really a miracle), there is an "on" and "off" switch.

I didn't know that. I didn't know that seeds have "on" and "off" switches. But they do. Every seed has a little "on" and "off" mechanism. And when you plant a seed into the ground at a certain temperature for a certain number of days, that mechanism goes on, but if the temperature too cold, the mechanism stays off. There is this miraculous mechanism, which goes on and off.

Now there is also a thin coat around that seed which protects the oxygen from coming in prematurely.

And then when this dormant seed is planted into the ground,
for the right number of days at the right temperature,
the switch goes "on" and the seed takes in water,
and it miraculously begins to expand,
and the seed coat is broken,
and it begins to mature and produces sugar and protein;
and then out come the little roots and the little shoots,
and the shoots produce more seeds which produce more fruit.

And that's what happens when a seed dies," said the professor.
"It's a miracle." Thank you, Dr. Gibbs.

Following Jesus is a matter of life and death.
But when following Jesus becomes a matter of death and then life
that it is when it becomes a miracle!
Amen.