

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 17, 2024**

**“And Where I Am”
John 12:20-33**

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Our Gospel Lesson begins with what seems like a practical request. Jesus is in Jerusalem, in what will be the last week before the crucifixion, when some Greeks approach one of the disciples, and ask: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (v. 21). The disciples consult with each other, then they share this request with Jesus—so that these visitors can meet Jesus and be introduced.

Yet what begins as a seemingly straightforward request leads to a theological reflection about Jesus, and his presence, and his approaching death. You may have noticed that, in the Gospels, Jesus doesn’t always answer questions (or, at least, not in a way anyone would expect him to). And that’s exactly what we find here: in response to this simple request, that some visitors “wish to see [him],” Jesus offers a profound reflection on what it really means to see him—to see Jesus in his life and in his death. Our Gospel Lesson is very eventful—there’s a voice from heaven (vv. 28-30), and Christ announcing his “hour has come” (v. 23) and his “soul is troubled” (v. 27)—but through all this, there runs a thread that answers, at the deepest level, that initial request: “*we wish to see Jesus.*”

Part of that answer is a call to discipleship; for those who “wish to see Jesus,” we hear an invitation to follow him: “Whoever serves me must follow me,” Jesus says, “and where I am, there will my servant be also” (v. 26). This much we might expect: if “we wish to see Jesus,” then of course we’ve got to follow him as disciples—so that we go wherever Jesus leads us. It’s an invitation for anyone who “wish[es] to see Jesus” to be drawn into his presence through the life of discipleship—so that “where [Christ is], there will [we] be also” (v. 26).

I think we expect that much; but our Gospel Lesson also teaches us where Christ’s presence will be found, where he will lead those who wish to see him. And this part might surprise us. Jesus offers what’s basically a miniature parable about “a grain of wheat”: “Very truly, I tell you,” he says, “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” (v. 24). Even though this parable seems simple, it can very easily be misheard or misunderstood—partly because, at first, it sounds a bit like other biblical images of seeds dying and rising.

Elsewhere, for instance, St. Paul writes: “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. [Y]ou do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. [...] So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable” (1 Corinthians 15:36-37, 42). The way Paul uses the image of a seed, he’s making the point that—just as a seed is buried and rises to life—so too the body dies, and then rises to new life in Christ. Paul’s point is that the seed dies so that it—so that the *same seed*—can rise.

But the parable in our Gospel Lesson is saying something very different: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, *it remains just a single grain,*” Jesus says; “but if it dies, *it bears much fruit.*” The

focus here is the seed falling and dying—so that it can “bear [...] fruit,” so that it won’t remain “just a single grain” (v. 24). Paul was talking about a seed that’s buried so that the seed *itself* can rise. However, in our Gospel Lesson, the point is this seed is buried in the earth, not for itself, but so that it can bring forth life for others.

This parable isn’t about Christ dying so that Christ himself can rise; this parable is about Christ dying so that Christ can uplift and raise and redeem others. “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus says, “it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. [...] *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*” (vv. 24, 32)—or, translated literally, “will draw all to myself” [πάντας ἐλκύσω πρὸς ἑμαυτόν]. I think this is really about the restoration of all creation—“all things” uplifted into the presence of Christ.

So with this image of the seed buried so that it can bear fruit for others, Jesus invites us to reflect on the mystery and meaning of his approaching death. Our Gospel Lesson concludes with the comment that Jesus “said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die”—which points to him being “lifted up from the earth” on the cross...but also points to him being “lifted up” to draw us up with him into risen life.

This whole exchange began when some Greeks asked: “we wish to see Jesus.” Now “to see Jesus” of course requires discipleship, requires following him—so that “where [Christ is], there will [his] servant be also.” To see Jesus, we’ve got to follow him. Yet then, in that little parable of the “grain of wheat,” we learn where Christ will be found, as a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying—so that it may bring life to others.

At the centre of the Christian faith is a very surprising claim: that God is powerful and eternal—and yet this powerful, eternal God chose to enter into weakness and mortality; that in Christ, God freely chose to join us in our fragile humanity; that God was not content to be God on high without becoming God alongside. That’s at the centre of the incarnation; that’s also at the centre of the crucifixion—as Christ, the grain of wheat, chooses to be buried alongside us in order to be with us and uplift us.

So if we “wish to see” Christ, we will see God entering into the fullness of the human experience—sharing with us in our worries and our fears, sharing with us in our weakness and our fragility, sharing with us in our defeats and even our death. “[P]ower is made perfect in weakness,” St. Paul says (2 Corinthians 12:9)—and, in Christ, God’s love is made perfect in weakness, too.

I’ve shared before how, in a previous church I served, I was once on a pastoral visit in a hospital, visiting a husband and wife who were hospitalized together, and who were both dying. As her husband lay silently, this very dear Dutch woman shared with me, “Last night, I was crying and crying—I just couldn’t stop crying. I felt so alone. Then,” she said, “then at three o’clock in the morning, all of a sudden I stopped crying. You know why?” She said, “Because I remembered what the Lord said. The Lord said: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ And then I realized,” she said, “And then I realized: Jesus has been here too. And I stopped crying.” In her suffering, she had found that Christ—the grain of wheat—was right there with her in the depths.

To see Jesus, we must follow Jesus; and in following Jesus, we must seek the presence of the one who suffered weakness and defeat and death in order to lift others up into new life. Our Gospel Lesson shows us, clearly and poignantly, that we may expect to see Jesus amid weakness; that we may expect to see Jesus amid failure; that we may expect to see Jesus amid fears; that we may expect to see Jesus amid suffering.

This is Christ who, like a grain of wheat buried, draws near to us at our very lowest and very weakest—and is indeed buried with us in our death—so that, out of the sheer grace and love and kindness of God, we may be drawn up into the risen life of Christ.

Jesus says: “[U]nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. [...] And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (vv. 24, 32). Amen.