

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2021

(John 12:20-33)

I'd like to begin this morning by asking you a question: *Did you hear the parable in the middle of the Gospel reading?* Yes, there is in fact a full parable there, tucked into a single verse ... verse 24: "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."<sup>1</sup>

That's the *entire* parable. The New Testament scholar Raymond Brown refers to it as the "Parable of the Seed that Dies," and it comes as part of a scene that our lectionary calendar presents a bit out of sequence. Just a few verses earlier in chapter 12 we read of the triumphal procession of Jesus into Jerusalem ... *on Palm Sunday*. So it's indeed surprising to be reading about a scene that takes place *after* an event we commemorate *seven days from now*. Regardless, here we are.

Just as every Gospel writer has their unique style – the constant state of immediacy in Mark, for instance, or the universal nature of Jesus' ministry found in Luke – there are a few structural points that make this uniquely a Johannine parable. For instance, the verse begins in some translations with the double usage of the word "truly," which also can be translated as "amen, amen" or in essence "I solemnly swear to you."<sup>2</sup> There's also John's particular use of the word translated "remains," *menein*, which also means abide, dwell or stay on.<sup>3</sup>

Seed parables are of course found in other Gospels. We know of the story of the mustard seed and its symbolism of the mightiest faith that can originate from the tiniest of origins. There's also the parable of the sower and its emphasis on the various ways that the teaching of Jesus fell on the rocky ground or fertile soil that were the hearts of those listening to him. What makes John's parable a bit more unique is its focus on *death and life*. Yes, I think that's a very intentional order: not life and death, where death is the end, but rather death and life, where death is *only the beginning*.

There is one way to examine this parable, one that may be quite obvious to many. It is of course in the context of what Jesus is about to endure on behalf of all humanity. Jesus is speaking of his own death as a way of obtaining life for all others.<sup>4</sup> The throwing down of his life – his self-sacrifice – will lead to the springing forth of new life. His crucifixion and death were the seed; resurrection and a new life for all creation were the new growth.

One of the sermon preparation tools I often use is to listen to a few of the many great podcasts in which clergy talk through the lectionary readings for the week and see what prompts arise from these conversations. In discussing this passage in an episode this past week, one of the hosts raised something that I immediately found challenging ... and inspiring. They asked that we consider the things in and about the Church that we keep alive – keep on life support, as they said – rather than letting them die and using the

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:24 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Brown. *The Gospel According to John: I-XII*, p. 471.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

energy that is freed up to bear other fruit.<sup>5</sup> In that host's experience, we as Christians are often death averse in these areas – a difficulty in letting go of particular processes, programs or ideas. Because of that aversion we completely discount the important second part of this parable: “if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

And therein lays the second way I invite you to consider this, specifically in the context of where the Church goes as we move out of the long period of pandemic separation.

The one common aspect of the past year we have all shared is mourning. Some mourn the deaths of family members and friends. Others mourn the separation we have experienced from those we love. Many mourn the loss of our time together here at church, marking the passage of the liturgical year with one another through worship, education and fellowship. It's been a time of much prayer and pondering. This morning, I ask that your prayer and pondering be turned to a question rooted in this brief parable: what are the seeds in your life, and indeed in the communal life here at Christ Church, that should be allowed to fall to the ground and die so that new life can spring forth?

One of the least helpful sentences that can ever be spoken is, “Well, that's the way we've always done it.” In the context of this parable, it's a reflection of not allowing the seed to fall to the ground ... of the aversion we have to letting go and the subsequent inability for new ideas to take root and new life to spring forth. These words may be spoken out of a desire to preserve familiar traditions and thus provide an emotional safe harbor in the midst of turmoil.

*But while they may be an honest and well-meaning acknowledgment of the past, they don't allow for honest and meaningful movement into the future.*

Everything about Jesus' ministry was a direct confrontation on the “that's the way we've always done it” mentality in his day. Jesus was about challenging convention ... about changing perspectives ... about changing minds ... about opening hearts. As we come out of COVID, it's time for us to challenge the conventions of the past. It's time to change perspectives. It's time to change minds. It's time to stop issuing the declaration “That's the way we've *always* done it!” and pivot instead to asking the question “What are the *new* ways we might be able to do it?”

As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”<sup>6</sup> What will we sow moving forward by letting something go, and what will take root in that sowing? There are many times throughout John when Jesus alludes to what is to come, hints that were all too often missed by his disciples and followers. But like a two-panel diptych in which the art on one panel *must* be paired with the other in order to understand the entire story, there's a second panel we must place next to that of Christ: “[O]ur own self-giving is also a part of the story.”<sup>7</sup>

In the days ahead, consider the seeds that you are clinging to tightly in your mind or heart. Reflect on whether that tight grip is need- or fear-based. Pray about which of those seeds

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<sup>5</sup> Pulpit Fiction Podcast, episode 422, March 11, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:36 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Wimberley, “John 12:20-26 – Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Vol. 2* (Kindle edition).

you should let fall to the ground. Finally, make room for God to work and watch the new life and new energy that springs forth when you trust ... and let go.

Amen.