

Losing Our Lives
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Date: March 18, 2018

15:55

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Do you know the term “Gone to seed?” What does it mean for something to have gone to seed?

In farming terms, gone to seed means literally that seeds have formed and unless you are eating the seeds, the produce is worthless, it tastes bad or is rotten all together. When wheat or corn goes to seed, we harvest it. When a zucchini has gone to seed, well, you know how big those are. Or many other fruits and vegetables. If you wait for a strawberry to go to seed, you have to wait for it to turn into that black, moldy muck for the seeds to be available.

We sometimes have trouble as things go to seed. But, go to seed they must. For if something does not go to seed, where the plant is ready to be turned under, turned back into the earth, and composted for what is to come, if the seeds don't fall down into the earth, nothing new grows.

Things must go to seed.

Jesus talks about this today as he says that the seed must fall to earth for new life to come. “unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains but a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Jesus is talking about his own death, a death he foresees as he gets closer to Jerusalem. In our liturgical calendar he arrives there next week. We spend that last week with him. And eventually he angers the wrong people and is put to death.

Imagine for a moment what it would have been like if Jesus has not died on a cross in Jerusalem. What would have happened if he kept going, as he aged, maybe got a little grumpy as he got older. If people started providing him with more resources and he built himself a fancy house somewhere near the Sea of Galilee...

Or maybe he would have gone off into the desert again not to return, to live out a monastic life in the desert.

What would happen if Jesus had not, in a sense, gone to seed?

In some ways Jesus' death, meant the disciples at the time, had to pick up the message and carry it forward. And here we are, two thousand years later, having picked up the message and we are carrying it forward.

We are the fruit that has grown from the grain that has fallen and grown again and fallen and grown again. And that continues in our life here in the church. To do that we have to face the inevitability of death. because that is indeed a part of life and a part of moving forward.

And that is difficult when death comes to sit on our doorstep, in our pews, because we grieve. We grieve the loss of people we love.

We grieve the changing of our church community as we say goodbye to people.

We grieve.

Death evokes in us so many primal emotions, and so many questions. Facing death, our own, our loved ones, our church members, we lean very heavily on our faith, on the traditions of the church, on the wisdom of those who have gone before, to lead us forward from this place.

Our Bible, the texts of our tradition, can be really helpful in death. So can our lived experience. And sometimes being within the body of the church that really started out in the moment of Jesus' death and resurrection. We are essentially as the church born out of the death of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we crave that there will be no more death. Or maybe just no more dying. Our culture is very much into denying death.

Do you know that you can buy products that will make you look so young that death will not come for you? Do you know that there are supplements that you can buy that will restore your organs back to that of a youth. That is possible if you just watch tv at the right hour. We spend so much energy pushing back against something that is inevitable.

Have you ever met someone who will never die? No.

Sherwin Nuland writes in his National Book Award book, *How We Die*:

"Mankind for all its unique gifts is just as much a part of the ecosystem as is any other zoologic or botanical form, and nature does not distinguish. We die so that the world may continue to live. We have been given the miracle of life because trillions upon trillions of living things have prepared the way for us and then have died—in a sense, for us. The tragedy of a single individual becomes, in the balance of natural things, the triumph of ongoing life."

I exist, you exist, because others have died before us in this closed system we call earth. We have to die or the system crashes, the resources are used up, and the planet dies. Death is natural. Death is a natural part of the seed falling to earth. And yet it seems to us many times the most unnatural, cruel thing imaginable. And we resist it.

Before his death in 1981, American writer William Saroyan telephoned in to the Associated Press, "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case." (*Today in the Word*, April 11, 1993.)

Not so.

The end of death--it does sound like heaven. But in the absence of that, now what?

We deny death. But on a deeper level we fear death. What happens when we die? We know our bodies shut down. Anyone who has ever been with a person in the moment when they died, experiences that transition when the loved one's central essence is gone. Even at funerals when we view someone in a casket, we know that they are not "there" But gone where?

As humans, our "whereness" is important to us. You all sitting out there have cellphones that give you your whereness. Our GPS tells us our whereness. We post on Facebook all the time about our whereness. We want to know where things are. We want to locate them, place them. Death confounds us on this. We can't know "where" when it comes to death.

We have lots of ideas about "whereness" handed down from years of Christian life and practice. One can go to Heaven, a wonderful place where we get to sit around in luxury all the time.

Or we may become one with God—the idea of drop of water joining the ocean

Or we might end up in Hell described as eternal separation from God or a place of awful eternal punishments—which sounds horrifying for us, but just about right when we contemplate the “bad” people “getting what’s coming to them.”

In death we come up against our fears. We are:
Afraid that something awful awaits us
Afraid of the unknown
Afraid haven’t been “good enough” and God will punish us, be angry with us.
Or we fear that nothing awaits us. We live. We die. That is it.

Death is scary because we don’t understand it; we can’t understand it. We truly won’t understand it until we get there ourselves, when we die. It is a mystery. And in the meantime, all we have are the promises of faith, the words of Jesus, the promise of God’s faithfulness to lean on. God’s promise that “I know you. I know your name.” But sometimes that doesn’t feel like enough.

Leo Buscaglia has a children’s book called *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*. It is a poignant reflection on death that speaks to children and adults alike. At one point, as autumn comes and Freddie faces his own death he is afraid to let go and so he speaks with the wise leaf Daniel on the neighboring branch he is also about to die. Freddie asks about what happens next--

Does the tree die too?
Someday. But there is something stronger than the tree. It is Life. That lasts forever and we are all a part of Life.
Where will we go when we die?
No one knows for sure. That’s the great mystery.
Will we return in the spring?
We may not, but Life will.

What happens to us in death? We don’t know. That’s the great mystery. Do we return? We don’t know but Life goes on, and I would easily substitute the word God for Life.

We can be assured that nothing essential is lost.

Nothing is lost. No one is lost. This is what we are promised. That is Jesus’ message for us in this season of Lent and we look to death.

Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian mystic and prophet wrote: "Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the lamp because dawn has come."

But the promises of God are sure and dependable. Jesus’ words are for us. We will not be alone, as we the grain fall into the earth. Our loved ones will not die and be lost. We are creations in the image of God and our selves, our holy inner parts, will not be lost.

Or as former president John Quincy Adams said while meeting with Daniel Webster, “I inhabit a weak, frail, decayed tenement; battered by the winds and broken in upon by the storms, and from all I can learn, the landlord does not intend to repair.” (Today in the Word, April 11, 1992.)

We also resist death because life is joyous. It is hard and we struggle. But we don’t want to let go either. Because life is sweet and when we die we have to release our hold on this world and all that is: loved ones, sunrises, walking the dog on cold crisp night under the stars.

Death is change, and change is always fearful as well as challenging, but until we can admit the fear, we cannot accept the challenge. Until we can admit the fear, we can't move forward. We cannot know the assurance, deep down in our hearts, that we will be ok. Ultimately, and I mean ultimately, we will be ok. God is present.

In Lent we think on death. We remember those who have died, both long ago and over these past few days. We offer thanks for their bright light that shone out in the world. And we tell the stories of our faith, repeat the assurances of our scriptures, affirm that death is not the end. That Jesus came to earth as our companion and teacher, and as a human being just like us, died and moved on to resurrection.

It is right to grieve. It is right to mourn. It's ok to wonder about death and not have all the answers. It is right to be angry in the face of death. To yell at God and ask why. To question God and say what now? To sit in the quiet of an empty house where a loved one is gone and ache. This is what happens when someone dies.

But our faith offers strength. Our faith offers the promise of hope. Our faith assures us we will not be left alone, we will not be abandoned, and at the time of our own death, we will be surrounded by God and be given eternal life—whatever that mystery turns out to be. No matter what, ultimately, we will be held in love.

That is the promise Christ gives us even as the grains fall to earth, even as he faced his own death, that Life, that eternal force, shall come again and again.

Amen.