

5 Lent Year B  
The Rev. Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sunday, March 18, 2018

***Dying to Live***  
*John 12: 20-33*

It may seem odd to say, but often the most moving moments of our lives, the times we really need God, are when one of our loved ones dies. These are the times that each of us – clergy, and loving family members – stands with one foot in each world.

In this world, we sleepwalk through the tasks of caring for our loved one as he or she prepares to die, or coping with a death we had no idea was coming. We care for each other, plan the funeral hymns and remembrances, and respond to the endless logistical challenges unleashed by death.

And in the other world, we stumble through the journey of faith, trying to make meaning of what's happened, and hoping our beliefs are true. If we can only resist our hearts being crushed closed by grief, there's no time when we're more vulnerable, more accessible to each other, and to God. That's why the death of a loved one can be the greatest teacher, an amazing invitation to transformation in the lives of those left behind. Given its power, I'm often amazed that we don't do a better job of planning for our own deaths. Which is exactly what Jesus is trying to do in today's reading.

Today is Jesus' final teaching moment in John's gospel. Although we won't celebrate his triumphant entry into Jerusalem until next week on Palm Sunday, in John's gospel, it's already occurred. There's such an explosion of excitement that, in the phrase immediately preceding today's reading, the Pharisees say to one another, "*Look, the world has gone after him.*"

Today even the Greeks, the Gentiles, are seeking out Jesus. And Jesus responds not with pronouncements of self-glorification that affirm his power on earth, but rather with an insistence that he must die.

And not only that. He tells them that his death will be the fulcrum through which the world experiences the most profound transformation in creation history. "... *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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*"

As Lent winds down we're already journeying together to the cross. And in spite of all of Jesus' attempts to help us understand this idea of dying so we might have new life, we're confounded by the question, "*Exactly what is he saying we must die to before we can also become truly alive?*"

There's a lot, as Jesus makes clear – all those things that are part and parcel of our being human: our selfishness and greed, our judgment of others, our determination to be right in spite of the cost, our quest to control every aspect of our lives, and often those of others... and on and on. We must die to the deeply ingrained habit most of us have of substituting our own will for God's will, in effect, trying to be God.

But the good news is that we don't have to die all on our own to have new life. We have the example of our brother Jesus, who walked the same paths as we do, experienced the same temptations as we do, endured the same afflictions, but who never lost his bearings, never compromised his humanity. It was he who walked, as the high priest into the great sanctuary and, on behalf of us all, placed himself on the offertory plate, as the one thing God truly desires, a human being fully alive. Which is why he was able to rise again three days later.

Some of you might know my friend Barbara Crafton's weekly blog, "*E-Mo from Geranium Farm*." This week, as spring promises once more to arrive in our back yards, she's all excited about the prospect of getting her hands into the dirt. Reflecting on today's gospel, she says, "*The more you think and wonder about death, the less tragic it appears. We are the ones that assert at least once a week, that this life and this world, much as we love it, is far from being all there is. There is an immense other context, a context of which we are almost completely unaware, waiting to be discovered and experienced.*"

Barbara imagines a dialogue with the seed that she's just about to plant, all dried up and nestled comfortably in its envelope. "*No thanks,*" says the seed, "*I don't want to taste water and feel the sun, feel a tiny green shoot break right through my heart, then grow and grow until it bursts into the light. I'll pass. I don't want to become a great sunflower, or a nodding poppy, or an oak tree. Nah, just let me stay here in my envelope with pretty pictures of these things, fully grown, on the outside.*"

But the gardener has other ideas. "*You're going to love it once things get going,*" she says, and presses the seed into the warm earth, sifting a little soil on top of it... and pressing again, pouring a gentle shower of water on top... and then blessing it all. "*Enjoy your next chapter,*" she says to the seed, "*I know I will – I can't wait to see what you become.*"