

**The Death of a Seed**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
*John 12:20-33*

Somewhere in my collection of childhood memories there is a hardware store, the old-fashioned kind, with wooden floors and lots of interesting things on the shelves, and that smell that can only be described as an old-fashioned hardware store smell: a blend of bicycle tires and garden tools and something else I can't quite put my finger on. Maybe the something else is the smell of seed corn in galvanized metal buckets near the front door, because that is always a part of this memory. When I was a boy I would go to the hardware store with my dad, and in the springtime, while he was paying for whatever it was he had come looking for, I would squat down and thrust my hand into one of those buckets of corn, feeling the smooth, cool seeds giving way and then closing around my small, warm hand. It is a vivid memory, and maybe that's why it comes to mind when I read this passage from John 12.

It's not seed corn Jesus is talking about when he says, in verse 24, that "unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains alone," but it is a kind of seed, and that's why I called Len Morrow last week to ask if he could help me out. Len is one of our deacons, one of our most faithful ushers, and to top it off he has a Ph.D. in Botany, which is the real reason I called. It was on Wednesday, when I thought he might be coming to church anyway for supper and the service that would follow.

"Len," I said, "this is Jim Somerville calling from First Baptist Church. Do you think you would have time to stop by my study this afternoon and talk to me about seed germination?"

“How much time do you have?” Len asked, and something about the way he said it made me think this was a subject he could go on about for hours—for days.

“About half an hour,” I said.

“I’ll be there,” he promised.

But while we are waiting for Len to show up in the sermon let me give you some background on the Gospel of John in general, and on this passage in particular. While all of the Gospels tell the story of Jesus, John tells it in a way that is strikingly different from the other three. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are sometimes called the Synoptic Gospels, a Greek word that suggests they can be “seen together”: *syn* as in *synthesis* and *optic* as in, well, *optic*. The Synoptic Gospels can be seen together but John is in a category by itself. The difference between Mark and John, for example, is like the difference between looking at a Norman Rockwell illustration and a painting by Pablo Picasso. They each give us a picture of Jesus, but the pictures they paint are almost entirely different. In Mark you find this very human, very earthy Jesus making his way through the Gospel teaching and healing and finally writhing on a cross saying, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” In John the divine Jesus seems to float three feet off the ground, his crucifixion is a kind of coronation, and he dies with a peaceful, “It is finished.”

So, in this passage from chapter 12, even though he touches on the subject of Jesus’ suffering, John does it in a much different way than Mark does. In fact, he almost seems to mock the way the Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus’ Garden of Gethsemane experience. In verse 27 Jesus says, “Now is my soul troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” And so instead of asking the Father to let this cup pass from him, instead of sweating

great drops of blood in the garden, instead of saying, “Not my will but thine be done,” Jesus—whose own will is indistinguishable from God’s will in this Gospel—says, “Father, glorify your name.” And a voice from heaven said, “I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.” Some people thought it was thunder, and others thought an angel had spoken, but Jesus said, “No this voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be driven out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this, John tells us, “to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

Do you see what I mean? There is no agony in the garden here; no mention of suffering. When Jesus talks about being crucified he says that he, when he is lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to himself. His death is deliberate, purposeful: it is how Jesus will save the world, it is how he will glorify his father’s name. And so when he hears that death is coming he doesn’t run from it, he faces it head on. It has been part of the plan from the beginning. And so we come to our reading for today, and the news that among those who had gone up to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover were some Greeks, who came to Philip and told him that they would like to see Jesus. Philip went to tell Andrew and then he and Andrew together went to tell Jesus: “There are some Greeks here who would like to see you.” And that’s when Jesus said that the hour had come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

It seems a little strange, really. These are just some Greeks in town for the festival. They’ve heard about Jesus, apparently, and want to meet him. But for Jesus this is the signal that his hour has finally arrived. You may remember that back in chapter 2, when Jesus’ mother asked him to help out at a wedding where they had run out of wine

he said, “Woman, what does that have to do with me and with you? My hour has not yet come.” But now, 10 chapters later, his hour *has* come, and it doesn’t have anything to do with turning water into wine: it has something to do with these Greeks who are requesting an audience. I can only assume that Jesus took their request as evidence that the news about him had gotten out to the whole world, and for him that served as a sign that the first part of his mission was accomplished.

It’s a little bit like an expectant mother who lives through those long months of pregnancy anticipating the day of her baby’s birth. Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, she gets the signal that her hour has arrived, and then she knows that what lies ahead for her is the struggle of labor and the joy of delivery. It’s like that for Jesus. When his hour finally comes he knows that it will mean the struggle of crucifixion and death, but he also knows that it will be followed by the joy of resurrection. That’s why he sometimes calls it the hour of his “glorification.” So maybe it shouldn’t surprise us when he says that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” and then, immediately afterward, says that “unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (vs. 24). Jesus is talking about his death, and about what it will accomplish. He is comparing himself to a seed, and that’s why I needed Len Morrow to come explain to me what happens to a seed when it falls to the earth and dies.

So he did.

He came in with a few sheets of information he had printed out and a tray full of visual aids, including a few potted seedlings that had recently sprouted; some roasted peanuts still in the shell; and a Ziploc bag full of assorted seeds, including corn, grass, and barley. The first thing he did was to crack open one of the peanut shells, peel off the

papery skin of one of the nuts (which he called the “seed coating”), and then split the nut open to show me the little nub inside, down near the bottom of one half—a tiny little thing, about the size of a pencil point.

“What is that?” I asked.

“That’s the embryo,” he said.

And I hadn’t thought about this, about a seed having an embryo inside, but Len assured me that every seed did, and that even though seeds could lie dormant for dozens, even hundreds, of years, if they got enough soil, and sunlight, and warmth, and moisture that little embryo would come to life: it would start putting down roots and lifting up leaves. If it was *dicot*, like that peanut, or like one of the white beans Len had sprouted, the cotyledons would spread like angel wings on either side of the stalk to nourish the young plant, and if it was a *monocot*, like the seed corn I remembered from that old-fashioned hardware store, then the roots would go down and a shoot would go up, but both shoot and roots would be nourished by the seed. And while Len assured me that the seed never really dies—it just goes dormant—he did acknowledge that the thing we know as a seed gives itself up as nourishment for the embryo inside it. And then he did this wonderful thing where he stood up and said, “The root goes down like this (pointing to his feet), and the shoot goes up like this (lifting his head), and the leaves spread out like this (stretching his arms wide, almost like a man on a cross). It almost takes the shape of a man,” he said.

Well, now I couldn’t miss the theological implications. If Jesus was the seed then that embryo nourished by his flesh must be...the church. Let me say it again: *If Jesus was the seed then that embryo nourished by his flesh must be the church.* “Unless a [seed]

falls to the earth and dies it remains alone,” he said, “but if it dies it bears much fruit.”

And I began to think about those rows of corn I had hoed as a boy: those tall green stalks, with each stalk bearing several fat ears, and each of those ears fairly bursting from their shucks. When we brought those ears to the back porch and stripped the leaves off there would be hundreds of kernels on each ear, and all of that from a single seed. If you think about it as Jesus and the church you can imagine how all of us here have been produced by that single seed that once fell to the earth in order to bear much fruit. As I was thinking about that on Wednesday, while Len was still sitting in my study, he said, “You know, one of the things that always amazes me about seeds is that if you plant a corn seed you get corn; if you plant an acorn you get an oak.” In other words, all that genetic information is contained in that little seed, and as the plant grows it becomes what the seed tells it to. If that’s true about Jesus then here is the church, sharing his substance, replicating his DNA, becoming what the seed tells it to. Or at least that would be the hope.

The Book of Acts tells us that it was in Antioch the believers were first called “Christians.” The word means “little Christs,” and even though it was intended as an insult by the unbelievers who used it in those days, in that place, it could be the best compliment in the world, couldn’t it? If someone said to you, “You are such a Christian! The genetic information that was in that seed has been passed along to you, the life that was in that seed has nourished you, you have grown up to be the spitting image of what he was!”

On the windowsill in my study I have those seedlings Len brought me. You can see the plant growing right up through what is left of the seed. You can see how that seed

nourished the plant and gave it life. And you can see that there's not much of it left anymore. Everything it was it gave for the sake of that plant—just like Jesus. “Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies,” he said, “it remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit.”

Hear this word, O church: you are the fruit Jesus died to produce. Look around you. Look at what his life and death have done. And then live like you've been died for, now and forever. Amen.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2018