

Year B Fifth Sunday in Lent 2024 Let the Church be the Wheat John 12 vv20 to 33

This story, although it is telling us about Jesus' impending death, actually has an important message to tell us about life – Jesus' life and, because of him, our life.

Jesus is living the last few days before his death on the cross. He has, a short time ago, raised his friend Lazarus from the dead and, because that amazing feat caused a lot more people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, it also caused the Jewish leaders a lot of worry and anger. In dismay they cry out, "The whole world is running after him!" This most definitely puts their position of power in danger of being toppled and they plot more earnestly to kill him. They say to themselves, "Surely Jesus wouldn't be foolish enough to come to Jerusalem where we can get our hands on him?" But, Jesus *has* just entered Jerusalem. He has ridden through the gates on a donkey with the adoring masses of people crowding around, singing praises to him.

A few Greeks, we are told, would like to see this Jesus. It's like a few huge fans of a popular rock star maneuvering to get a backstage pass. They approach Philip – the disciple with a Greek name, perhaps figuring he would be their best shot at getting that pass. Philip grabs Andrew and off they go to Jesus, together. Jesus, they say, there are some Greeks who would really like to see you. His answer? Well, it seems quite out of place.

Rather than "Sure, bring them over," or "No, I'm too busy right now," Jesus responds with, "It's time for me to die." And, not simply die, "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," he declares. His death, resurrection, and ascension are melded together by John into the one great act of God that glorifies Jesus – the act that exalts Jesus above all others because he has been raised from the dead in his post-resurrection body that will never again die and he is now fully in God's perfect

kingdom, seated with God. If these Greeks want to see Jesus, they are going to see a whole lot more than a charismatic teacher and healer believed to be the Messiah. They are going to witness the most spectacular miracle, the most significant miracle, of all time. To put it in John's terms, through the glorification of Jesus, we, too, will be glorified.

Jesus explains this to us through the example of wheat. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, he says, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. One pound of wheat grains can produce about 90 pounds of wheat (epicgardening.com). One person, Jesus, dies and has the potential to rescue, to give eternal life to, all of humanity. Jesus was the first human to receive the Holy Spirit at baptism. He lived a life of baptismal ministry and then, when he died, he was raised to new life through the power of God who is the source of all life. He was the first and we can choose to follow in his footsteps. Through the mystery of baptism, Paul tells us we have already participated in Jesus' death and resurrection – we are already, as we heard last week – seated in the heavenly places in Christ. With the presence of God within us, although we are imperfect, we are to live in God's kingdom and reveal God's kingdom to others around us, inviting them to live in God's kingdom as well.

This, as I've said maybe once or twice before 😊, is a choice that we must make.

God's kingdom is here but so are the worldly kingdoms. Jesus frames this choice in a very interesting way: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." John often uses the word "hate" to mean "reject". So, what Jesus is saying to us is that those people who love the life the world has to offer will end up not having eternal life with God. Those people who reject the life of the world will have eternal life with God. Why is the life of the world

such a bad thing? It's not that Jesus hates well-dressed, well-fed, wealthy people like us. The problem is that the people with worldly power – and all of the perks that go along with it – acquired that power because of systemic inequalities and injustices. We don't feel like we have a lot of power but we are a part of that system, often without realizing. I love my morning coffee. Foods like coffee, chocolate, and spices used to be luxury items that few could afford and few had access to. Now we find those things readily available in the grocery stores of many developed countries. The key phrase there is "developed countries." The average daily wage in Canada is about \$145. There are 14 countries in the world where the average is just \$10 or less in a day. In Afghanistan, the average person does not even earn enough in one entire day to walk into a Tim Horton's to buy a coffee. When you make just over a dollar a day, you are certainly not going to spend it on a coffee.

<https://www.worlddata.info/average-income.php> There are times when I don't drink all I've made and I dump a cup of coffee down the sink. The fact that my basic life necessities are most often provided by people who cannot afford those very same necessities is just one form of inequality in the world. We could talk for the rest of the day about all that is wrong with how the world operates. But realizing the brokenness contained in what I consider my small enjoyment of a cup of coffee and in the waste of coffee makes me realize how much brokenness in the world I participate in. It causes me to question, "how much have I really rejected the life of the world?" That's a question all of us could ask and all of us would probably respond with, "Not enough." However, we cannot despair over this realization because, honestly, we can never totally let go of the world's broken ways of operating, we will never get to "enough". Acknowledging our participation in the world's brokenness and continuously striving to participate as little as possible is a

start but there must be some other way of rejecting the world, of choosing life in God's kingdom in the present. And there is.

Psalm 19 asks, "Who can tell how often he offends? Cleanse me from my secret faults" (v.12). Yes, we are tangled up more than we can know, more than we can untangle on our own, and God will forgive this. Repentance, as you probably remember, is a turning – a turning away from the world, a turning to God. We are asked to focus our desire on God and on what God wants. This, of course, is an effort, a continuous effort. This is something we can only do with God's help and with the support of the people around us.

One thing mentioned in our conversation following worship last Sunday is that there is no "I" in the liturgy we experience together each week. It is always "we". There is very good reason for this. As important as we each are to God as individuals, God's ultimate purpose is not just that each person has a good relationship with God. On its own, that would never, ever mend the brokenness of the world since much of the brokenness has to do with the relationships and interactions between people. God's endgame is complete reconciliation – three-way right relationship between people, planet, and God. When that complete reconciliation is achieved, God's kingdom will have come on earth as in heaven. Bishop Lesslie Newbiggin writes that we, the Church, are the sign, the foretaste, and the instrument of God's kingdom. Together we practice the perfection of the kingdom each time we gather, others see this and know what the kingdom is meant to be, and we, together, work to spread the perfection of the kingdom, take it beyond the liturgy, beyond the walls, bring other people to join in the "we" so that the complete reconciliation of all things can become a reality.

When I read through this passage, one thing that really jumped out at me was that sentence about the wheat: “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.” It struck me because we use this line in our liturgy each week in Lent: Let your church be the wheat which bears its fruit in dying. In order to reveal the kingdom and build the body of Christ, the church must die. Remember, dying means rejecting the ways and thinking of the world and embracing, desiring the ways of God. We are quite good at reaching out to others with abundant generosity and hospitality of God’s kingdom. We are not so good, a lot of the time, at turning our back on the world’s way of thinking. Numbers dominate our thoughts when we think according to the world and this leads us into fear since the numbers, according to the world, don’t have us thinking that we are very successful. But success is not a biblical concept. Being fruitful is. We don’t say together: Let your church be successful. We say: Let your church be fruitful. There is a huge difference. Being fruitful holds within it a passion for walking in God’s ways. Being fruitful, says Pastor Lovett Weems, is not about personal or congregational glory [or success], but, rather, being fruitful is about revealing more and more of God’s kingdom to more and more people. Letting go of the fear and focusing on and figuring out and acting upon what God wants for us, we will serve Christ. Where Christ is, we will be and God will honour us for doing that.

“And I,” says Jesus, “when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” We are in that process and we are a part of that process. That is exciting. “With my whole heart I seek you,” we said earlier in Psalm 119. Continuing in the words of that psalm: Let the whole heart of the Church seek God. Let us meditate on God’s precepts and fix our eyes on God’s ways and, together, let us be the Church that bears its fruit in dying.