

Sermon: Allowing the Scripture to Work on Us

Scripture: John 12:20-33

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And so we approach the culmination of Lent as we are one week away now from Holy Week. I would encourage you to consider how this most sacred story that we are rehearsing in community right now is being reflected in your own life. One of the great gifts that is mine in being your pastor is this necessity that I have each week to take the scripture and live with it and ponder it in light of my own life, the life of the community and what I am hearing in the news of the world around me. I wouldn't say it happens every week but there are many times when the scripture given to us by the common lectionary sounds opaque at best and sometimes meaningless upon my first reading but then as I live with it throughout the week it begins to come alive, even speaking immediately into whatever is happening within me and around me and what emerges is both the meaningfulness of the scripture but also the deeper meaningfulness of what's going on in my life. In an amazing way, the depth and meaning of the scriptures begin working on the depth and meaning of my life, even on an unconscious level that then pops to the surface occasionally for some fresh insight that I feel like I needed. What I've found time and again in my personal experience is that the scriptures can be a remarkable tool of insight and discovery.

So I wanted to encourage you in the next couple of weeks if you don't already do it to read a daily scripture especially as we move through Holy Week and approach our most holy feast of Easter. You can turn randomly in your Bible and just read a passage, follow the lectionary by googling daily lectionary, or look in our insert and read the passages for each week. And then just let it percolate, rather than reading it with an effort to understand it and apply it to your life, read it, let it sit with you and work on you and watch and wait for it to speak. It's a more passive approach that really trusts that the Spirit has something to say and can powerfully use the scriptures to say, which is why for 2000 years Christians have called them holy, because through them God speaks. It's not the only way God speaks for sure, but a powerful central way.

So read it and let it percolate within you. A particular reading might make no sense to you or it might seem perfectly evident what it means. A passage might make you angry or resistant. That's fine too. There might be something in that response that the Spirit can work with quite effectively. There might be one word or one phrase that sticks with you for some unknown reason or another phrase that sticks in your craw. But the work is to honor whatever response to the passage is honest in you, don't judge it, just notice it and let it do its work. It could be a great spiritual exercise to deepen and highlight our walk through Holy Week making the approach of Easter all the more meaningful.

There are two spots in today's scripture reading that I would like to lift up to you because they were the ones that popped for me. If you were to have read this scripture throughout your week you might have had some other sentences or ideas that would surface for this morning you are stuck with hearing what popped for me and maybe there will also be some resonance for you with these two ideas and your own life over the last week or what you might be approaching in the week to come.

The first was this passage: "truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit." This is, on the surface, the words of Jesus preparing the disciples for his own death which is fast approaching, but what a rich rich statement! If we each took that one sentence and wrote it on a piece of paper or memorized it and carried it around with us this week, I wonder how it would work on us? What unpleasant experiences have we faced this past week or will face this coming week and what if we held Jesus' statement right up against it and instead of asking ourselves the natural question of how do I get out of or avoid this unpleasantness we asked ourselves what is dying within us right now through this experience? What in ourselves are we realizing we need to die to and if we really let ourselves die to that what is the fruit that could result? Any unpleasant situation, don't you think we could say, is some sort of dying on some level. The not-so-easy work is to try and discern what the real dying needs to be. So in a struggling and difficult relationship, for instance, the discernment might be do I need to die and let go of my own efforts to control the other OR maybe its: I need to die to my tendency to allow the other to control ME, die to whatever I get out of being the victim and I need to assert myself.

Just to give one example. Either way though what is the value we could get out of looking at it through the lenses of this scripture and saying - this unpleasant situation is some kind of dying, but a dying that will give way to fruit in my life. But I don't think it's necessary to try and think through it all through on our own, but just to receive what comes to us if we stay open and attentive. It's a spiritual practice in relinquishing. We just give God a little time and space to figure us out, because sometimes I wonder if God can't even keep us with us in all our busy scurrying!

The other moment in this scripture that surfaced for me this week for some reason was this sentence: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to show what kind of death he was going to die." Here we have the image of Jesus being lifted up on the cross as being some kind of calling or awakening for all people. Now here, I have to admit, some of my theological study kicked into my pondering of this passage, but it's really not necessary to have four years of seminary, for it to speak to you. Sometimes, maybe it's even a deficit to being open and empty and hearing what the scripture has to say to us. But in my case it was my theological study of Renee Girard connected with this passage that came to mind.

So we have this very graphic and strange image of a savior murdered on a cross and lifted up in that brutality as somehow the critical and formative moment of our faith. And what Renee Girard says is that the fundamental effect that the cross has on people – maybe even all people who see it - is that no one can look at that cross and say what we often say in situations of corporate violence like war or capital punishment and that is: "he deserved it" or "we had to do it". Instead what we see when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross – all of us, whatever religion we are or if we are no religion at all - is an innocent victim of sincere authorities and righteous religious people. The rudimentary human tendency in relationship, from time immemorial, what we might call the original sin, is our coming together with one another over and against another. We somehow believe that in order to be made "OK" ourselves, to be saved and justified ourselves, there must be a person or those people who are not OK, not saved and unjustified. We might say it this way too – our temptation and too often our practice is to resist our necessary dying by killing someone else instead and that someone else we call a scapegoat. As Renee Girard suggests, the only reason we can even think this way and

understand this truth about ourselves is because Jesus was lifted up on the cross and finally made us conscious of it.

Now how might this scripture work on us and speak to us here in Charlotte, Vermont in 2009? Well, I would propose that our Governor, a fellow UCC'er I might add, has not YET – as far as I know - made the connection between his savior being scapegoated and lifted up on the cross and the way our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters are scapegoated in our society. The reason I say “not YET as far as I know” is because I'm not sure whether he has read the email that I sent to him on Friday! For the truth of the matter is wherever we have a group of people who are separated out and treated differently from everyone else and whenever the separation is accompanied with a certain amount of accusation and blame of the victim – for instance, “they are never satisfied and they are threatening the sanctity of marriage” - then we have a classic case of scapegoating which is the very central thing that Jesus died to release us from as a people.

The beautiful thing is step by step I think we really are being released from this tendency even though the process feels at times like a dying. People thought at some level that we were going to die if we passed the Civil Union legislation and we did die as a state *to that fear* and as far as I can tell it brought more meaning and joy to people than it brought destruction and sorrow. Now the next step, in my humble opinion, in this process of confronting the scapegoat mentality that separates one group out for sacrifice or lesser treatment is occurring. But then of course an equally important question is how should one approach this issue without creating more victims and scapegoats on the other side of the aisle? That's where it gets tough and interesting. How not to scapegoat the scapegoater so as to avoid becoming scapegoaters ourselves and keeping the whole cycle going?

It seems there, the answer is really simple – it's a matter of keeping love in the equation and keeping love in the equation among other things (as we've been reading in our book study) means being willing to be in the conversation and struggle with vulnerability. The minute we steel ourselves against the other and refuse to share our vulnerability is the minute we are in danger of entering the blame game and continuing the scapegoating cycle. This is a central lesson of the cross, to above all else maintain our

love and vulnerability. It certainly doesn't mean we shouldn't fight injustice and should suppress our feelings of anger and frustration or that we shouldn't work towards a more just society, but it does mean we need to do that from a place of love and vulnerability. That's where – ironically – our true power lies. Isn't that what the cross and Jesus' life teaches us?

“On that cross I will draw all people to myself”. I will become on that cross the Final Scapegoat that opens all eyes to the cruelty and injustice of our relentless tendency to justify and save ourselves as the expense of others. So how do we live with that one throughout the week? I have no idea but your life might have an idea... God might have an idea of how the scapegoat tendency, which we all practice at some level, is operating in your life, whether you are the perpetrator of it or the victim of it. And if we stop and listen we might find the way to address a situation of struggle and conflict without setting up a winner and loser scenario, without creating victimizers and victims. That is the key – to address our issues and problems as best we can without setting up winners and losers.

So in light of this scripture and just to recap things in closing I am saying that in a situation of struggle and conflict we need to ask ourselves a central question: “What needs to die here?” And for those of us who find for ourselves meaning in Good Friday and Easter, we can no longer with a clear conscience answer that question by saying “HE needs to die or SHE needs to die,” that the dying needs to happen out there somewhere, but rather the Jesus follower must instead ask “is there something IN ME that must die so that all of us might be raised together to a new life?”