

March 17, 2024
John 12:20-33
“Lift Up”

There are a lot of times when I don't want to be transformed. I don't want to be a seed in the dark soil, waiting for the conditions to be right to be broken open and sprout into something new and unknown. I don't want to change with the seasons and become something I am not used to being. To stick to the text a little bit more closely – I don't want to be that grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying so that I can bear much fruit. Perhaps some of you have felt the same way about being a disciple of Jesus Christ some days. Perhaps it is easier to lie in the darkness of our comfortable beds at home than to risk dying and rising with Christ in the fullness of the Kingdom.

Once again in our reading for this morning Jesus is speaking using a metaphor to help his followers discover a deeper meaning for his life and teaching. Jesus is encouraging his disciples to follow him, even into uncomfortable situations and places so that they will bear good fruit for the kingdom, and bear it in abundance. So people are compared to good seeds and the process that they have to go through in order to come to fruition and harvest.

My mother was an avid gardener, and she would start planning her garden months in advance, as the seed catalogs were arriving in the winter. She would place her orders and patiently wait for the seeds to arrive. When the soil was warm enough she would work the ground and prepare it to receive the seeds, and then plant, and wait, and water, and wait, and then ultimately enjoy vegetables, fruits, flowers, and an abundant harvest. This is something of the sense that Jesus is trying to get across to his followers. They come from an agricultural society, so they understand the cycles of preparation, planting, growing and harvest that Jesus is talking about. We may need a little more reminding since we do not all live close to the earth in the same way of those first followers.

I imagine that even the first followers might have balked at the idea of needing to die and be reborn in order to be a disciple of Jesus. It goes against all common wisdom to be asked to hate our lives, when every self help guru out there tells us that we must instead love ourselves. What does it mean to turn our backs on the world in order to be lifted up by God?

In the time of Jesus it meant turning one's back on the accepted religious, social, and political structures which dominated the Middle East. Instead of earthly riches and power being the goal we are to seek, we are to seek for treasures in heaven instead. When people were part of the political power structures where the few dominated the many, Jesus invited them to become rich in love and compassion instead. When the religious leaders sought to gain more control over the people of the world by imposing stricter rules and regulations, Jesus tells them that the Sabbath is made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath. This is a topsy-turvy upside down understanding of how God works in the world, and how we must die to our old ways of thinking, doing, and being in order to become followers and disciples.

Our ancestors in the Methodist tradition learned about a literal following of Jesus, as some of them were selected to go out and teach and preach the good news to the people. Wesley

was rejected by many of the Anglican churches of his day, and instead brought the word of God to the marginalized, the poorest of his world, rather than trying to get the self-satisfied and comfortable people in the pews to die to what they had known and become lifted up to bear the message themselves.

Of course there were some people in the pews that listened and were moved and took action, but the leaders of many churches banned Wesley from speaking to the congregations they were in charge of. This was similar to the way Jesus was treated by the religious leaders of his own day as well. Very few people want to embrace change, even positive change, even the change that Jesus invites us to make. Being changed, or being lifted up to the knowledge and service of God's kingdom is often challenging.

But it is not all bad news in the Gospel reading for today. Jesus is talking about the massive change that is coming to him, when he will be lifted up on the cross and suffer, and die. At the same time he reminds his disciples that he will be transformed and come into new life, like the seeds sown in the fields. What is more, anyone who wants to get lifted up can come along and be with him.

We began the reading by mentioning some Greeks who wanted to speak with Jesus, and Jesus welcomes the questions of the Greeks and tells them how to have their lives transformed. It might have been some Samaritans, or women, or Ethiopians, or any other group of people outside of the accepted social systems of the Jewish people of his time. Here is an excellent example of Jesus welcoming all people to learn from him and experience salvation as he is lifted up on the cross.

Jesus lifted up ideas that transformed the understanding of his followers and the world, and was then himself lifted up on the cross, and ultimately lifted up into heaven. He lifted up people who were poor and lowly, or criticized, ostracized, or powerless, sick or needy. He told his followers that they would be drawn to himself, a word of hope for eternity shared with all of us. Our task is to determine what it is that we are going to lift up for those who follow us – what are we lifting up for our children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren that will lift them up as well?

It seems clear to me that leaving a building is not enough. There have been buildings dedicated to God over the centuries, and yet still the poor are with us. I don't think that leaving a liturgy, or hymns, or worship practices for future generations will be enough, for we have already seen how quickly these things can adapt and change when they fail to lift up new generations the way that we were lifted up by them. I don't believe that leaving rules, laws, and narrow interpretations of grace or who can and who cannot be included will be enough to lift up our descendants to experience the kingdom of God – over the centuries, beginning with Jesus and never ending, we have seen exclusiveness, restrictiveness, narrow-mindedness, bigotry, and all manner of things fall to the ground and die.

I believe that what Jesus would have us do is to lift up the very same kind of people that he was lifting up – the poor, widows, orphans, resident aliens, the sick, the powerless and the oppressed of his day. Jesus would have us be lifting up the marginalized and the unappreciated,

the out-casts and the otherwise un-loved of the world. In other words, I believe that the lifting up that we have to do begins and ends with sharing God's unconditional, unrestrained, unrelenting love to everyone in our world. One of the great places to begin is to help our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren know beyond all earthly promises that they are deeply loved by ourselves and by a God who is lifted up in love for them as well.

Our love, and the Love of God, puts us into conflict with our world that preaches that power, fighting, strength, and domination are the ways to win at life, and yet lifting one another up in love is what will ultimately save our world. This is the hope and promise of these words from Jesus this day. Thanks be to God.