

Sermon: A Grain of Wheat

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 17, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A woman went with her husband to the doctor's office for checkup. After some time, the doctor called the wife into his office alone. He said to her, "I am giving you a list of things to follow, and If you don't do them, your husband will surely die": 1) Each morning, fix him a healthy breakfast; 2) be pleasant and make sure he is in a good mood; 3) for lunch, make him a well balanced meal; 4) for dinner, prepare him a nutritious treat; 5) don't discuss your problems with him; 6) don't ever burden him with chores. On the way home, the husband asked his wife what the doctor said to her. She gave it some thought and finally answered, "The doctor said, you are surely going to die."

A man went into his doctor's office for a physical. After a while, the doctor came out and said, "I'm sorry Bill, but I got bad news. We've discovered in you a terminal condition. You've only got 6 more weeks to live." "But Doctor," Bill replied, "I feel great! I haven't felt better in years. This must be a mistake. Isn't there anything I can do?" After a moment the doctor replied, "Well, you might start by going to that new health spa, and take a mud bath every day." Excitedly Bill asked, "And that will cure me?" "No," replied the doctor, "but it will get you used to the dirt."

Get used to the dirt! From earth we came, to earth we shall return. That is why in the Presbyterian liturgy of interment or burial, we say "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" Death is, for all of us, an inevitable condition, an inescapable fact of life.

But it is interesting how Jesus faced his death, how he processed the meaning of death, not just for himself, but for all who follow him. The occasion arose when, according to our Scriptural lesson of John 12, some Greeks came to Philip, one of the disciples, during a festival, and said to him, "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*"

We wish to see Jesus! The request was not unusual, for the name of Jesus had travelled far and wide, due to his teaching, his healing of the sick, the signs and miracles he was performing. Everywhere Jesus went, he was always drawing a crowd. Now that his name has travelled beyond

his immediate circle, even the Gentiles are now asking to see him. So Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went to tell Jesus. I guess there is a chain of command within the disciples' rank.

Jesus answered them, in verse 23, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" Evidently, Jesus sensed the approaching moment of the true and final purpose of his life. He calls it 'to be glorified', but we would soon learn it to mean his impending death.

However, to Jesus, death is not the end. To the Son of God, who is the begotten and the beloved of God, death is but a process, a necessary evil to be endured, yet a stepping stone onto something greater. So Jesus said, in verse 24, "*Very truly, I tell you, 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.*"

A grain of wheat! Using an agricultural metaphor undoubtedly familiar to his hearers, Jesus draws our attention to a single grain of wheat. Left alone, it is limited, contained, safe and not much use. You can try to ground it, bake it for food, but it does not satisfy. However if you bury it in soil, in good soil, with the right amount of moisture, bacteria, and warmth from the Sun, and stand back and wait. You can call it transformation; you call it dying and rising, that one grain of wheat will bud and grow, and produce a crop of thirty, sixty, or a hundred folds.

Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus uses a similar metaphor to describe faith, but here, Jesus uses it to describe life. As if to reinforce, to drive the point through, he went on to say, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

History is littered with those who loved life, who in life fought for it to no end, and died with literally nothing to show for. Take for example, Napoleon Bonaparte, who was, should we say, larger than life, who was nevertheless responsible for the death of 1/2 a million French soldiers, approximately 1/6 of the population in his time. When exiled by the British for the last 6 years of his life on the Island of St. Helena, his wife never wrote to him; she married another man while he was still living. His son never visited; he was confined to small house and grounds under British guard. The tombstone on his grave read simply, "here lies."

Take another example, Adolph Hitler, who lived the last 4 months of his life in Berlin, in a bunker. It is believed that he went prematurely senile or insane. On April 29, 1945, he married Eva Braun and dictated his last

testament in defence of his actions. A day later, he shot himself while his wife took poison. Their bodies were simply burned by those remaining.

Mark Twain, praised as the greatest humorist the United States has ever produced, became morose and weary of life. He wrote this in his Autobiography, "A myriad of men are born; they labor and sweat and struggle for bread; they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble for little mean advantages over each other. Age creeps upon them; infirmities follow; shames and humiliations bring down their prides and their vanities. Those they love are taken from them and the joy of life is turned to aching grief. The burden of pain, care, misery, grows heavier year by year. At length ambition is dead; pride is dead; vanity is dead; longing for release is in their place. It comes at last - the only unpoisoned gift ever had for them - and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence; where they achieved nothing; where they were a mistake and a failure and a foolishness; where they have left no sign that they have existed."

However, history is also filled with those who follow the Way of Jesus, too many to recount. They have heeded the call from Jesus, the call to servanthood, who said in verse 26, "*Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*" Indeed, they understand at a fundamental level that Jesus comes to serve not only for the sake of the humankind, but for the sake also of the glory of God.

Jesus does not relish in suffering. In fact he prayed that it be taken away, as in verse 27, "*Now my soul is 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. Father, glorify your name.*"

For indeed, the Church has codified this understanding of the glorification in its confessions, as in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the opening: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." Similarly in the confessional document of the Living Faith of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, in its opening sentence: "There is one true God, whom to know is life eternal, whom to serve is joy and peace."

Such life eternal begins not at the point of death, but in the here and now, and continues on for the age to come. The here and now is a life filled with faith, hope and love. The age to come is pictured in the Bible in different ways. As Living Faith 10.2 outlines for us: "an eternal kingdom, a

new heaven and earth, a marriage feast, an unending day, the father's house, and the joy of God's presence."

It is glorious, this life of servanthood, for the humankind and for God's glory. It needs not be something spectacular, brave or remarkable. It needs not be noticed by others, but only noted by God. It takes the form of humble serving, of choir practice, of laying out tables and chairs for coffee hour, or putting away cups and dishes, or helping out with the Children Sunday School. It takes the form of faithfully contributing to committee work, of praying diligently for others and for self, of visiting the shut-ins, or those hospitalized. It takes the form of cutting grass around the church, or helping to maintain the flowerbeds, or replacing a broken light bulb in the sanctuary.

I used to tell the joke about how many presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb. I no longer do, ever since observing Rob and Isaac, building a large scaffolding, and climbing high up to change that one light bulb in this sanctuary.

This life of servanthood is lived out in community, in the ordinary life of faith with extraordinary hope. Yes, death is still with us, but it no longer has power over us. A single grain of wheat falls into the earth, dies, and rises and bear much fruit. And the voice from heaven says 'glory'.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**