

March 22, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN

Fifth Sunday in Lent
John12:20-33
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TO LOSE AND TO GAIN

In today's Gospel text, a certain group of foreigners want to meet with Jesus so they can see – actually, the word is “perceive” – him. Remember how the Gospel writer Matthew wants us to know how the wise men from afar, foreigners from Persia, came to worship Jesus at the manger? Here, the writer John wants his readers to be aware that Jesus' ministry caught the attention of learned people from learned centers around the Mediterranean. Visiting Greeks want to “perceive” him! Several of the disciples get word of this request and pass it on to Jesus: “Teacher, these people have heard about you; they seem like reputable, educated Greek types. Good for your rather shaky reputation to be seen with people of this caliber, eh Jesus? How about we set up a meeting?” Jesus' reply? “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified!” I can see his disciples, Philip and Andrew, shaking their heads: “Jesus, stay on point, please. These Greek fellows are interested in your teachings; do you want to meet with them or not?”

But Jesus is already off in another direction. He makes this brief reference to the ancient Jewish apocalyptic writings in the Book of Daniel about the end times. These are stories that probably originate during the exile of the Jews in Babylon, but were recorded later about 160 BCE. The writings speak of a future time when God will send someone who is “like a son of a human one” to come and help get rid of all the beast-like nations who are ravaging the people of Israel. But in self-referencing as “the Son of Man, of the human one,” Jesus does not lay out a plan for how God is going to overthrow the current repressive Roman regime. Instead, Jesus immediately launches into an agricultural metaphor. He speaks of seeds needing to fall to the earth and cracking open, dying, for there to be a new plant and fruit and additional seeds. “Okay...what might this have to do with *us*?” his disciples are muttering at this point. “We're fishermen, remember? What's with the farming metaphors?” Then, with little warning, comes Jesus' punch line: “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” “Oh no,” I can imagine the disciples sighing with exasperation, “here he goes again with the self-sacrifice part.”

I am afraid we are not eager to hear these words of Jesus either. For starters, what on earth does Jesus mean that we should “hate” our life? This, from a man who so clearly reveled in life, to the point of the religious leaders claiming he was a glutton and winebibber? Here was a man who apparently enjoyed good conversation, wedding feasts and lengthy dinner parties, people from all walks of life including young children, sly jokes, flowers of the field and

birds of the air. He just didn't talk much about "hating" things or people. Jesus clearly loved life. Something else is going on here.

Our Thursday night study group this week grappled with this notion of loosing one's life in order to gain it. We were discussing a chapter in Cynthia Bourgeault's book, "Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind," that explored what she calls Jesus' "self-emptying love" (p. 62ff). We were struck by the author's statement: "My hunch is that a good many of the difficulties we sometimes run into trying to make our Christianity work stem from the fact that right from the start people missed how different Jesus' approach really was." "In Jesus," Bourgeault continues, "everything hangs together around a single center of gravity, and you need to know what this center is before you can sense the subtle but cohesive power of the path he is laying out." As we considered this passage, we remembered how Jesus would say that "the first shall be last, the last shall be first." He told people to give their cloak, their other cheek, their food, themselves, to the other. In letters to the early churches, the Apostle Paul will describe this as Jesus emptying himself and being born in human likeness, humbling himself and being obedient to the point of death on the cross (Philippians 2:9-16). Paul will use the Greek word "kenosis," "to let go" or "to empty oneself," in speaking of this path.

Always the self-emptying, the letting-go. Losing our lives in order to gain them. The seed needs to die and crack open so the new life can spring forth and there can be more seeds of new life. Jesus offers us a difficult question to ponder: What within each of us needs to die in order for us to live more fully? Perhaps it is a habit? A grievance or resentment we harbor? A misguided perception about the world? Sometimes things "die" in our lives, but not by our own choice. I realize now, as I look back over my life, that some things had to die, to disappear, from my life in order for me to mature and grow spirituality. Some things had to be lost. Only after a painful divorce did I open myself to a deeper sense of my own personal autonomy and responsibility. The process emerged slowly, through supportive friends and family, counsel of professionals, prayer and simply sinking into the loss. This, in turn, enabled more healthy adult relationships and my eventual remarriage. Years later, I lost my job as a hospital chaplain in that institution's downsizing. I felt bereft and panicked, but eventually recognized my deep desire to return to being a parish minister. I certainly would not have initiated either of these difficult losses in my 30s under my own steam. But I had to let myself fall into them, self-empty into them, so I could move out the other side to someplace new within myself.

I have found that this question of self-emptying, of losing to gain, of even disdaining our life in this world, to be important for churches in the interim period. I'm not too pleased with thinking of Jesus using the "hate" word, but I catch his drift. When he speaks of us needing to hate the "world," the word used here in Greek is "kosmos." The Biblical commentator Charles Campbell notes that the word "kosmos" is "not synonymous with God's creation, but is rather the fallen

realm that exists in estrangement from God and is organized in opposition to God's purposes" ("Feasting on the Word," Year B, Volume 2, p. 141, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor). "The world," he suggests, is a superhuman reality, concretely embodied in structures and institutions, that aggressively shapes human life and seeks to hold human beings captive to its ways." The "world," Campbell continues, is better translated "the System," whose ways are dominated by consumerism, violence, domination, and which is driven by "institutions that perpetuate racism, sexism, heterosexism."

These are strong words, but I think they bring us closer to what Jesus is talking about. The ways of the world, the "kosmos," work against God's intentions for us and we are called to "die" to these ways. Given Jesus' seed metaphor: What is it within a congregation that may need to die and crack open, so we can live more fully into God's purposes for us? What ways of the church world may need to die for God to more fully work through us?

Jesus was constantly talking about this: the great reversal that we don't expect. The loss, when faced and embraced, that leads to gain. I find these to be oddly hopeful questions in my own life and also in the congregations that I serve during interim periods.

I had a good chuckle with one of our Property Ministry Team members the other day about church furniture. And no, I don't mean about the Sanctuary altar, about which there has been considerable debate in our congregation of late. This faithful servant has been hauling out all kinds of things from corners and closets downstairs, and has discovered a huge cache of old children's-sized wood and metal chairs. We smiled at the thought of all those chairs being filled once, and hopefully again, by young children. I realized that these very chairs were a potent symbol of the many children here during the post-war Protestant church heyday, from the 1950s up until about the '80s. These stacked, unused chairs can be a sad reminder of shrinking numbers as we have moved into the 21st century.

But it occurred to me that these empty chairs could also be a symbol of the important changes in how we share the Christian faith and the Jesus way with children. Just as there have been many changes in public school teaching over the last 30-40 years, we no longer insist children sit attentively in a chair for hours on end while we pour Bible facts and stories into the supposedly empty container of their brains. This was the Christian Education strategy of my childhood, now dismissively labeled as the "banking theory of CE." Teachers made "deposits" into the empty "accounts" of a child's brain, assuming that the child could "draw on" these investments later in adult life as a Christian. It's important to acknowledge that many children taught in this manner are no longer part of faith communities as adults, nor are their children. We are realizing now that something may not have "stuck" for many of our adult children, and this is a great loss for us as parents and grandparents of certain generations.

In weekday school and in our Sunday programs, we no longer assume that children all learn in the same way. We invite imaginative questioning, movement, artistic expression and emerging technology, in ways that go beyond the flannel boards and passive sitting of my Sunday school experience as a child. We now know that children's faith is powerfully formed as they are a part of the church's wider life together; we find we need more inclusive ways of worshiping, singing, exploring scripture and praying together.

And it's not just about children. We have come to realize that all of us need interaction with different ages, and the perspectives of different generations, to grow in our faithfulness. We don't need children because they are cute and say amusing things. Jesus says we must *become like them* in order to enter the Kingdom of God! Inquisitive, open, ever restless to know and experience more. We all need intergenerational interaction in service projects like sandwich making for local homeless shelters, or all church cleanup days where there are tasks for all sizes and capabilities. All ages need all ages.

Yes, the empty chairs may symbolize what has been lost in churches all around the country: a certain commonality between generations, of shared experiences and values that just isn't prevalent anymore. But in this loss of a common culture, we are beginning to see that we are gaining new perspectives as we talk and listen to one another. We can practice learning about the "other," we open our hearts to other people in order to experience and see things differently from us. We become better equipped to move among and appreciate our increasingly diverse communities and wider world.

Churches that are thriving and growing in vitality have learned to address this hunger for cross-generational and cross-experience connections. We are learning to name the losses, and how some things must die for new life to emerge. May we continue this steady process of discovering what we are gaining by these unexpected losses and changes around us. This is the path of abundant life, eternal life in this present moment. May God enable us to lose, and to gain, gracefully. Amen.