



Go Ahead and Fall

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2021

John 12:20-33

In today's gospel reading from John, Jesus gives one of his most famous, and most difficult, teachings. He says:

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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.¹

This is a challenging teaching, but it shows up in different versions six different times in the four gospels, always as part of Jesus preparing his disciples for what is coming—which is his pending arrest, trial, and death. This teaching can't be ignored; it's obviously central to Christian faith, whatever it might mean. And not only does it appear to apply to Jesus, but to us too. Each of the times this teaching comes up Jesus also tells his disciples to follow him.

At first it might seem like Jesus is saying, just as he laid down his life, there are times we must be willing to do the same. And in hopefully rare occasions, this is probably the case. We have only to look at the example

¹ John 12:24-25

of many of our saints, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King, to realize that there are times when God might ask this of us. But I suspect Jesus isn't only talking about those extreme moments in life. John's gospel is the only one where Jesus uses a metaphor from the natural world to help us understand what he means. He talks about a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying in order to fulfill its innate purpose, which is to generate more life. A seed is only a part of an entire plant, whose purpose is to generate many generations of future life. We see this especially at this time of year, the spring equinox, when all the earth is waking up and the robins are nesting and the squirrels are giving birth and many of the great traditions have festivals and rituals that symbolize new life, including Christianity with Easter.

My point is that Jesus seems to be saying something about who we are and what we are made to be and to do. He seems to be saying that something about our normal way of understanding our lives and our purpose and even our identity might be just a hair wrong. We might be acorns thinking we were destined to remain acorns, when the future is eager for oak trees waiting to be born from us.

Here's another translation of this reading from a contemporary paraphrase called the Message Bible:

Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

At its very core, the Jesus' Way of Love is about the radical risk of pouring ourselves out, trusting that the love and life of God will then fill us and pour through us. It's about the opposite of clinging and grasping and hoarding. The Way Jesus makes possible is about opening our clenched fists. It's about cultivating such a trust in God's life that we are willing to lay it all down, to let go of things as they are, even the form of our own lives and the privilege of our institutions, so that radical new life can generate all around us. That new life is not created or orchestrated by us. But it does flow through us, and it does so much more when we open ourselves instead of trying to grasp onto and possess and save what we have received.

Some of you might be familiar with another very famous scripture that says this about Jesus:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.²

² Philippians 2:1-8

This visual image of Jesus refusing to “grasp” or cling to his status, and instead empty himself, might seem like a recipe for codependency or martyrdom, and not in a good way. It might seem like terrible news for those of us who are already at our last straw, for those who have not one single thing left to give. But what Jesus is actually asking for is the risk to let go. It is the risk to allow ourselves to fall to the earth, like the grain of wheat, and surrender to trusting God’s love. It’s allowing some things to end without controlling what will take their place. It is about trusting that if we make ourselves empty, maybe even if we admit that we already are, the overwhelming love of God can finally flow through us.

If you look carefully at scripture, you will see this same theme repeating itself over and over again. In the beginning, God the Creator overflowed with love and delight, God poured Godself out, and spoke the world into being. That same God overflowed, speaking to Abraham, and launched an entirely new people to venture into the unknown on a journey they could not control because they knew nothing about it. Each time the people of God get themselves into scrapes, God adjusts, God meets them again, God finds a new way to lead them to healing and integrity and life and a future. God overflows. God is love, and love is relational and moving by definition. The “emptying” that Jesus is speaking about and that he accomplishes is a death, and it is an end, and it will not do to pretend otherwise. But it is also a beginning of something exponentially greater, for which only the joy of springtime—of buds and sprouts and eggs hatching—is an appropriate metaphor. Emptying makes room for the overflowing love of God.

In the Episcopal Church’s beautiful Book of Common Prayer, there is a prayer that says this:

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*³

This Way of the Cross, this paradoxical Way of Love that dares to sacrifice, that dares to lose, that dares to respond to violence with nonviolence and to hate with love, is what Jesus is inviting us to follow. So this spring, when the trial of Derek Chauvin has our city on edge, and when we might finally be seeing light at the end of this terrible pandemic tunnel, and when so many of us are truly at the end of our rope for these reasons and so many others, let's do this. Let's take the risk to just go ahead and fall to the earth like a grain of wheat. Let's allow some things to end so that some other things can begin. Let's open our clenched fists and simply meet each moment as it comes, seeking only to receive and pass along the love of God.

If you're not sure how in the world to begin to cultivate this in real life, I will offer you a practice from contemplative Christianity, in particular from Richard Rohr and Cynthia Bourgeault, two prominent Christian teachers in the Wisdom tradition. They teach a simple practice called Centering Prayer. In it, you sit still for twenty minutes, and yes, this is possible even for those of you who think you can't be still even for one minute. In your sitting still, your intention is to *consent to the presence and action of God*. It's inherently receptive, not active. You pick any word that

³ The Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 99 ("A Collect for Fridays"), also accessible online at <https://www.bcponline.org>.

to you is sacred and emotionally neutral, and every time you catch yourself thinking, even if it's some amazing spiritual insight, you use your sacred word to let your thought go, to bring yourself back to stillness and quiet and receptivity to God. Each time you repeat your word, you are a grain of wheat falling to the earth, surrendering to the love of God, and letting go. You are doing this because you trust that beyond your thinking, however powerful it might be, is a greater way, a deeper way, a place in you where God resides.

We may not experience mystical illumination doing this prayer. But what we might find, if we do this regularly, is that we are more easily able to surrender our contracted ways of thinking in the rest of our daily lives—even our way of being and doing church. We may begin to trust God more, and maybe even become more open to other peoples' points of view. We might become willing to recognize and then surrender all sorts of things that we ought not to cling to, like privilege. We might be more comfortable with that which we cannot control, and more open to changing our ways and habits and lifestyle, to following Jesus to the places of the world's pain and to discovering the joy and the beauty of life where we least expected it. We might become available for the healing the racism in our city and nation which, despite the heroic efforts of so many, has continued like a metastasized cancer for 500 years. This prayer is the prayer of surrender, of emptying, so that we can be filled with the overflowing love and wisdom of God. So that we can truly at last become open to change. So, like the grain of wheat, let us just go ahead and fall. Amen.

