

“Unless A Grain Of Wheat Falls Into The Earth and Dies”: The Holy Week
Mystery

Pope Francis wrote: “Rivers do not drink their own water, trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself; flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are all born to help each other.... Life is good when you are happy; but much better when others are happy because of you.”

Margaret Meade, the noted anthropologist, is quoted as saying that the earliest sign of civilization is the archeological discovery of a healed femur of a human leg bone. It showed that a person was cared for until the bone was healed and not left to die. Such evidence has led some to say that such findings suggests that the human species is a compassionate species. If we are created in the image of God, why would this not be true?

Self-giving love is central to the flourishing of our lives. Jesus pointed us there with his words in John:

“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.”

Jesus was referring to his own approaching death, which John calls his “glorification.” For him Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension into heaven were all of one piece.

In Roman Catholic theology and worship this is called the “Paschal Mystery”. We might call it the “Holy Week Mystery”: it binds together the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as one great saving act. In fact, in Holy Week Catholics (and not just Catholics) combine three services over three days as one service: the Good Friday Service, the Easter Vigil on Saturday night and the Sunday morning Easter Service. They call it the “Triduum.”

Why is all this important to know, other than helping you on Jeopardy? It speaks to the importance of our lives built on the uniting of all three. Some Christians are “Good Friday Christians”. They focus their spiritual lives on the death of Jesus. Their central symbol is the crucifix. The promise of Easter pales in comparison. Other Christians I would call “Easter Only Christians”. Their lives circle around Jesus’ resurrection. It is as if Good Friday never happened, as if the world never turns away from the way of love, as if Good Fridays do not happen over and over again. So we seek this week to hold all that happened this week together as one.

When I was growing up Southern Baptist we moved from Palm Sunday’s Hosannas to Easter’s Hallelujahs with no remembrance of Maundy Thursday’s

Last Supper or Good Friday's Crucifixion. It is different today for our church and many Baptist churches. It helps us take in the fullness of what happened and its meaning for us today.

II

So this Palm Sunday of Hosannas, let us ponder Jesus' words: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit." He was speaking not only of his life, but our lives too—and how the way of giving, of pouring ourselves out for others, leads to a greater life.

Jesus points us to the natural world as an example. The natural world teaches spiritual truths. A seed pod wants to open as all life wants to open and to bear fruit, but unless it falls into the earth and dies it remains alone. In our spiritual lives, something must die before something can be born, something must end before new life can spring up. Can we believe this, trust in this? That self-giving love can lead to our own flourishing?

When the young Southern writer Flannery O'Connor contracted lupus, it meant she had to move back to her home in Milledgeville Georgia so her mother could help take care of her. She feared it would be the end of her "Work", and she would have to be resigned to it the way one has to be resigned to death. But all her greatest works of fiction came after of her move home.

Sometimes beginnings come camouflaged as endings. As Anne Lamott wrote: Everything I 've needed to let go of had claw marks all over it.

One approach to life we could call “The Zero-Sum Game” way. The term comes from mathematics, but it pertains to the way some people live their lives. Zero-Sum believes that for one person or group to win another person or group needs to lose. The pie is only so large, so I need to claim my bigger piece. It has a “scarcity” mindset of life.

In contrast Jesus believed in the unbounded generosity of God. We trust in the generosity of God and live with an “abundance” mentality. We give and we are given, generosity begets generosity, and the pie begins to expand.

One view of life is that it is a fight to the finish for scarce resources. The other is a life of self-giving that leads to flourishing. The word sacrifice or self-sacrifice may cause your stomach to tighten a bit. This may be because social and cultural norms have assigned to certain people the role of the “sacrificers”. These belong to the “sacrifice class.” Others are in the “receiver class.” Gender, race and economic class can be determiners here. Nations, communities, marriages and relationships wither and die under those rules and norms. In the kingdom of God all receive and all give in the mutuality of love.

Jesus was talking about voluntary, willing acts of sacrifice, what arises from sheer love. Someone drew two pictures, one of heaven, the other of hell. In hell people were around a table full of delicious food, but they were starving because all their arms were in splints and they could not get the spoons to their mouths. In heaven it was the same, people sitting at a table full of sumptuous food, their arms in splints, but in this picture people were not starving because they were feeding each other. A parable, like Jesus' parables, of the kingdom of God.

III

Later in John, Jesus says, "Greater love has one than this, to give his life for a friend." We sometimes neglect the power and depth of friendship and friendship love. Such love can be as full and self-giving as other forms of love. As one has described friendship: "comforting and exuberant, sacred and miraculous connection."

And we can think of the love of mothers and fathers in whose love of their child they would rather suffer themselves rather than see their child suffer. A mother passes through "the valley of the shadow of death" to give birth to her child. As one has said, "But for the courage of mothers none of us would be born." And in marital love, the giving and receiving is not 50/50, else it be no more than a social contract. It is 40/60, 80/20, 30/70, as we take turns caring for one another as needs arise.

As I think of Jesus' words, I think about the love of a soldier for his fellow soldiers in battle. Greater love has no one than this, to give his life for a friend. They risk their lives for their friends. I think of one of our congregation, Paul Leonard. Serving in Somalia, his convoy returning to airport received word of a Black Hawk Down. They immediately went to rescue their fellow soldiers. Ambushed all along the way they sustained heavy machine gun fire. Paul was terribly wounded in his lower left leg, some lost their lives, but they saved the lives of the downed soldiers.

Later in July 1918, Paul, by act of Congress the President of the United States awarded him the Silver Star for "Gallantry in Action". Part of the citation read:

"Throughout the entire operation, he displayed great personal courage and complete disregard for his life. His actions resulted in both a successful raid and return of a convoy that could easily have been annihilated."

Where does such self-sacrificing love come from but from the One who made us?

I read recently about a 15 year old girl who was passing a railroad crossing and saw an elderly woman in a wheelchair who had gotten stuck between the tracks and could not move while a train hurtled toward her. The girl whirled into

motion and with great and heroic struggle freed the women a scarce second before the train hurtled by.

I think we all in less heroic ways everyday give of ourselves to others for their help and flourishing. I see you doing it. It is all a participation in the great love of God and the love of Jesus whose whole life was a pouring out of himself for others and for us. Not just on the cross, but all his life.

IV

Later in John, John says of Jesus:

“Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from out of the world to the Father, *having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*” That is how he has loved us.

When World War Two ended and the death camps were liberated, someone found this inscription written on the inner wall of one concentration camp, a prayer. It read,

“O, Lord, when I shall come with glory in your kingdom, do not remember only the men of good will; remember also the men of evil. May they be remembered not only for their acts of cruelty in the camp, the evil they have done to us prisoners, but balance against their cruelty the fruits we have reaped under the stress and in the pain; the comradeship, the courage, the

greatness of heart, the humility, and patience which have been born in us and become part of our lives, because we have suffered at their hands.

May the memory of us not be a nightmare to them when they stand in judgment. May all that we have suffered be acceptable to you as a ransom for them.”

Then the prayer concluded, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies”.

Whoever wrote those words knew the love of Jesus, had heard the words of Jesus to the thief on the cross next to him who when he asked, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom”, Jesus answered, “Today, you will dwell with me in Paradise.” And then his almost unimaginable words: “Abba, forgive them for they know not what they do.” He had been formed by the one who, loving us, loved us to the end.