

Sermon
Lent 5-B
St. Andrew's, Methuen
March 21, 2021
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Jeremiah 31:31-34
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33
Psalm 51:1-13
or Psalm 119:9-16

Jesus gives us today a parable for how to grow in the life of the Spirit: "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."

In wealthy America some folks come to church, not to grow in Spirit, but to enhance their persona, their exterior shell, so it would never have to suffer the humiliation of being cracked open.

You may remember the parable of the acorns told best by Cynthia Bourgeault in The Wisdom Way of Knowing (pp 63-66).

"Once upon a time in a not so faraway land there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called 'Getting All You Can Out of Your Shell'. There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

"One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped 'out of the blue' by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. **Pointing upward at the tree, he said, 'We...are...that!'**

"Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continues to engage him in conversation: 'So tell us, how would we become that tree?'

Well, he said, pointing downward, it has something to do with going into the ground...and cracking open the shell.'. 'Insane,' they responded. 'Totally morbid! **Why, then, we wouldn't be acorns anymore!**'

In calling his followers to fall into the ground and die, Jesus is first of all not speaking about physical death but a kind of psychological death in which we allow our shell—our self-image with its carefully curated Story of Me—to be cracked open.

This cracking of the shell is something the ego finds too frightening to imagine. We are happy to be religious as long as it enhances our shell and makes us appear smarter, prettier, kinder, stronger, even holier than we really are, in order to receive the acceptance of those who can help us on our journey toward success.

For instance: Back in 2001, George O’Leary, successful head football coach at Georgia Tech in Atlanta, was hired to be head coach at prestigious Notre Dame. Unfortunately, however, only 5 days after he was hired, it was discovered that he had claimed on his resume to having a Master’s degree that he didn’t actually have. Since the good folks at Notre Dame take integrity seriously, George had to give up his dream job.

He loved his life, so much—that he lost it.

Instead of climbing up into the glory of the world, Jesus calls us onto the path of that goes down to discover who we really are in God.

Jesus models this climbing down by his practice of eating with the outcast and hanging with the ordinary, that is with those whose shells are visibly damaged by life. But in the end Jesus goes beyond psychological dying in order to reach us all, for he says, “when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

But let’s be clear: even for Jesus this journey down is never easy: for he says, **“Now my soul is troubled.”**

Yes, it troubles our souls too, but experiencing this trouble is the only way of discovering that God is in our souls.

Richard Rohr, Renegade Franciscan Priest and spiritual teacher, calls this the path of falling upwards, which is the title of one of his best books.

Rather than teaching us how to protect and polish our outer shell, Rohr teaches what he calls the practice of praying “for one good humiliation a day”. In the experience of humiliation, we can notice our “idealized persona” and the ways we hide our brokenness and thereby avoid needing God.

One of the chief ways we hide our broken places is to project them onto others who we then despise: **If our dreams of perfection are not coming true, then we can blame our failure on, say, Asian-American women and attack them instead of humbly doing our own soul-work.**

Of course, it helps if we belong to a church that, like Jesus, welcomes the broken and teaches them a **spirituality of imperfection that trusts in the forgiveness and acceptance of God.**

Which makes me wonder about the stained-glass windows of the three martyrs to the right of our high altar: Stephen the proto-martyr, and . I'd be interested in knowing what effect these have on your spiritual life. Do you see them as examples of an unattainable perfection, or as examples of ordinary women and men who kept falling into the grace of God?

George O'Leary could have let his public fall from grace ruin his life, but after mourning his mistake, he kept coaching, first in the pros for a couple of years and then with the University of Central Florida for 12 years. At UCF O'Leary was named conference coach of the year four times and National Coach of the Year once. His players had one of the highest graduation rates of any team in the country.

Jesus says: "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."

As we head next week into the Sunday of the Passion, let us take up our soul-work, Cross, and follow Jesus into the falling upwards that leads to living not for ourselves but for others, especially those whose imperfection makes them especially loved of God.