

DYING IN ORDER TO BE FRUITFUL
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Last week on Saturday, I sat on my deck in the back yard, I was thinking about what I was going to plant in the garden, planters and window boxes in the yard. Then Sunday hit and out of nowhere came some big flakes of snow a temperature drop of 30 degrees and the unexpected return of winter. It didn't make any sense and was quite a shock, much like the start of today's Gospel. I would like to use that experience to unpack some of what we have in today's Gospel.

First of all there is the timing. This is the time of year when people begin to plan their gardens. The stores are full of seed packets and young plants. The trees are budding out, the Cherry blossoms are finally coming out. As we look out the windows here, new life is just ready to burst forth. Yet last week was mother nature's lesson that the time wasn't right yet for the work to begin.

Jesus all through the gospel of John has been saying, not yet, it is not my hour. Philip and Andrew come up to him and tell him that there are some Greeks to see him. Seemingly out of nowhere, instead of saying hello it is nice to see you, Jesus announces that it is time for him to be glorified! The signal is not the arrival of the first robin of spring, but the arrival of the Greeks who sought out Phillip and Andrew to get them to introduce them to Jesus. This is the fulfillment of the prophecy that the message would be taken to all and that even the Greeks would seek out the Messiah. The time is right is what Jesus announces in what to many is his puzzling non-sequiter to the statement by Phillip and Andrew that there are people who want to talk to him. So Jesus tells us that the time is right, but to do what? He speaks of the wheat seed that must fall into the ground and die. That brings me to the next part of my reflection about last Saturday's aborted planting project.

Thinking about planting the seeds reminded me of an elementary school biology project that I helped my son Jeffrey with many years ago. You may remember this type project, I think almost everybody does it at some point.

James came home with four seeds in an envelope and instructions on how to plant them. We filled a Mason jar with potting soil and put the seeds down in the soil right at the edge so that we could see the seed pressed against the side of the jar. We had several seeds because not every seed would germinate and grow. The point was for Jeffrey to see how the seed was transformed as it grew.

As the days went by and Jeffrey remembered to carefully water the seeds and keep the jar in a sunny window, the plants began to grow. The seed first sent out a little root and then sent the first shoot up towards the light. I remember one day when he

exclaimed, “Hey Dad, look! The seed is shrinking. James’ exclamation helps us understand a critical point of the metaphor of today’s gospel.

First of all, Jesus states that the seed must fall into the earth and die. A seed sitting on the shelf doesn’t do anybody any good. A grain of wheat by itself is useless. It either needs to be crushed and made into bread or planted to grow into a plant to produce more wheat.

In other portions of the gospel and in the writings of Paul seeds and new growth are metaphors for the resurrection and the flowering of the community. Jesus in this passage makes the point that first the seed must be crushed, the seed must die, in order to be transformed and grow into the plant that God intended it to be. Jesus is telling us that he must be crucified and die before the resurrection can occur. Without a Good Friday there cannot be an Easter.

Seeds don’t really die in the sense that they decay and are ruined. They do cease to be a seed however. The sense in which they were a seed does in fact die, but the result is a transformed, living plant that bears fruit. This is all about transformation, but transformation does not come easily or painlessly.

My son’s seeds, like many seeds, had a hard shell. Quite often you have to soak the seed to soften the shell so the tender shoots can break through. If the shell doesn’t soften and crack open, nothing can grow. Many of us have tough shells. Shells that need to be softened by the love of God and watered by the intimate presence of Jesus.

Our shells came in for attention in next portion of the gospel today. I find the translation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson particularly instructive. In the part just past the reference to the wheat seed Peterson translates the passage like this: “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” The shell that many of us hold onto so desperately stifles the ability to grow. It keeps us from being transformed into the disciples the Jesus calls us to be, the ones who enter into eternal life.

Part of that softening action, the breaking open, is to examine what in our lives needs to die in order for us to be transformed and grow. Lent and the quickly approaching Holy Week are good times to take that question to God in our prayers.

The act of asking God these questions may be for many of us a daunting and possibly even frightening undertaking. Like seeds left in a bottle on the shelf of the garage, leftover from the previous year, we may not even know what type of seed we are, what type of plant we can be. We will never know what kind of seed we are until we are planted in the earth. A leap of faith is required for us to get off the shelf and into the dirt, into the dirt where the water of Jesus’ baptism and light of God’s love can begin to work their magic on us.

There is another thing that any gardener knows. A lone plant cannot bear fruit. We don't plant a garden with just one tomato plant or one bean plant. Plants need the pollen from others like them to grow and produce fruit. They will grow just fine by themselves, some might even produce a little fruit, but to have a good harvest, a plenteous harvest, takes many plants. It is the same thing for our Christian community. This is not just an individual venture, but primarily a communal effort. The fruit that Jesus is talking about is the fruit of our community's faithful action and growth. The fruit is the very life of our community of faith.

Like the seasons this is also not just a one-time proposition, but an ongoing process that has times of great productivity and times of rest. The time of rest like our winter is coming to an end. Just as the seed swells with the water of spring rain and bursts forth with the sunlight, this parish is ready to burst forth into the world with a new and renewed vigor of knowing Christ and making Christ known.

The time is right, here and now this spring for us at St. Aidan's to begin a new cycle of growth and fruitfulness. This growth and fruitfulness is what we have been talking about all during Lent. For our community to experience this renewal of life and fruitfulness will require all of us to examine what in our life is holding back our growth both individual and corporate. This renewal will require us to examine what in our life needs to be die to be put aside in order for us to be transformed by the light of Christ's love. That transformation holds incredible promise and excitement if we are bold enough to take the risks that this involves.

As we prepare to enter Holy Week, I encourage you to use the metaphor of the seed that is transformed and bears generous fruit as a touchstone for what is about to come. Join us as a community as we walk with Jesus through the various services that begin next Sunday with Palm Sunday and progress through the services of darkness on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday into the glorious light of the Easter Vigil and Easter morning. Allow God the time to work on your shell to open you to the possibilities that await us to be transformed individually and communally this Easter.

Let us pray: Oh Gracious and loving God let your light shine upon us like the gentle sun of a new spring and water us with the water of Jesus' Baptism. Soften our hearts to respond to your transforming love as we walk the path of your Son over the next few weeks. Give us the courage to ask the tough questions and then to respond to your call so that like the seeds planted in the spring, we may all be fruitful members of the Body of Christ. Amen