



THE SEED WHICH BEARS FRUIT



Catalog No. 20140223
John 12:20-50
26th Message
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February 23, 2014

I have a fake plant in my office and that is a good thing because I don't have a green thumb. For that reason, I was caught off guard some years ago by an experience of significant horticultural success. We bought a sapling, an apricot tree, and planted it next to our driveway. It grew into a very ordinary sized tree, but there was nothing ordinary about the amount of fruit it produced. We could never keep up with the abundance of apricots; couldn't eat them, store them, or give them away fast enough. Branches broke off because of the weight of the fruit. So, we finally gave up on this tree and took it out, not because it failed to grow but because it grew so well.

I was put in mind of this "much fruit" apricot tree when studying the passage we are going to consider in this study (John 12:20-50). In it Jesus will speak of life proceeding from death, centering on an agricultural metaphor: "*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*" Taking note of the context, these events occur on Palm Sunday only a few days before Jesus' execution. The Lord had entered Jerusalem as a king who rood a donkey—the true sovereign of the Jews, but not the hoped-for military figure who would cast out the Romans.

John 12:20-23—

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²²Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

In verse 19 the Pharisees complained that the interest of so many Jews in the miraculous raising of Lazarus meant that "*the whole world has gone after him.*" Now we see, with the coming of these Gentile seekers, the problem has grown worse. The whole world indeed. History is approaching a great climax. The hour has come.

The final hour marks both a beginning and an end as we shall see. On the one hand, Jesus' death will *glorify*

the father' and *'draw all people'* to himself. On the other, it signals the end of Israel's opportunity to receive their Messiah.

John 12:24-26—

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. ²⁵Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

The metaphor is not difficult to understand, but its application is breathtaking—Jesus' death is the path to eternal life. He is the seed. We receive life in abundance from his willing death on the cross on our behalf. In addition, his unique sacrifice becomes the example for his disciples to follow—losing our lives (dying to ourselves) leads to eternal life.

We can easily misunderstand this. Jesus is not calling for self-contempt or for rejection of the natural world when he speaks of hating one's life *'in this world.'* Worldliness here is the self-absorption that is characteristic of Adam's fallen race. It is the principle of rebellion, of selfishness, of pushing God aside and elevating what is human. We must reject (hate) the tempting attractions of the world, losing our lives in order to gain eternal life.

Later in the New Testament the apostle expands on Jesus' words in his letter, 1 John. "*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever*"(1 John 2:15-17).

But the world is relentless. Have you been watching the Olympics? During the many hours of programing there are about six commercials that get replayed over and over again. What are they selling? Cruises, cars, investment

strategies—all promising fulfillment and security.

And it may be worse here than anywhere else. The myths and promises of Silicon Valley in the 21st Century have made ours, perhaps, the most worldly culture that has ever existed. The worship of ‘human genius’ combined with the possibilities of instant wealth, gaudy excess, and world-wide notoriety are intoxicating. The notion of a ‘self-made man’ is not new. Fifty years ago he would be pictured thus: a man in his 60s with a pot-belly, thinning grey hair, tidy suit, cigar in his mouth, saying “I built this company from nothing!” Today we picture the self-made man as a 28 year old Vegan with torn jeans standing in front of his fleet of private jets. The world promises to pay off faster and in bigger numbers than ever before. But the benefits have an expiration date. The world is passing away along with its desires. The promise is, finally, false.

Our rejection of the world only make sense if the death of Jesus ‘*bears much fruit.*’ If anyone serves me, he must follow me. We take up a cross and as an expression of thanks to the One who died for us.

Verse 27 takes us deeper into what Jesus experienced as his death drew nearer.

John 12:27-33—

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

John does not tell of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion as the other three gospels do. On that evening, he cried out at length, in deep distress and asked that if possible, that his life might be spared. Jesus’ prayer in these verses occurred four days earlier and we can see some similarities. Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘*Father, save me from this hour.*’

We can be both encouraged and challenged by Jesus’

dependence on prayer. If Jesus scoffed at suffering and leaped upon the cross like Superman we might admire him, but we’d not turn to him for help when we are frightened, weak, and lost. This description of his ‘*troubled heart*’ allows us to approach him. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: “*We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

In verses 31-32 Jesus announces three things that are accomplished by his sacrifice. First, he says that the world is judged. Second, the ruler of this world is cast down. And finally he says that, having been raised up on the cross, he will draw all people to himself. In this last case he is not suggesting that every individual will be saved, but that people from every condition, every geography, every tribe, gender, age, etc. will be drawn to him. No kind of person will be missing among his followers.

What does it mean that the world is judged? How can the killing of a Galilean carpenter have meaning on so grand a scale? But, of course, Jesus’ death was not simply the execution of a local troublemaker. It was the act that exposed the guilt of the entire human race. All human beings are guilty of defying the living God. We cannot look on from a distance and judge the crimes of Caiaphas, Pilate and Judas. They acted just as we would have acted in their place. There are no innocent human hearts. We are all responsible for the crucifixion of the Son of God. The rebel world is judged in the execution of the Righteous One.

What of the second declaration: the ruler of this world is cast down. In what way does the cross nullify the power and authority of the evil one? Hebrews 2:14-15 observes that the devil wields the power of death and that we are slaves to sin because we are afraid to die. But for believers, because we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, lasting separation from God (death) no longer looms in our future. Our bodies will expire, but death no longer has eternal consequences. The temporary ‘benefits’ of sin seem alluring as way to distract ourselves from inward guilt and encroaching darkness. The devil’s lies lose their power when shame in the present and fear of the future no longer grip our hearts.

Finally Jesus said that his death on the cross (being raised up) would beckon all men and women. This claim is unique to him. There have been other great teachers and compelling personalities throughout history. But great ideas and inspiring examples only go so far. They do not

have the power to effect lasting change in us. Our greatest need is not for admonishment to do our best, but for a Savior who welcomes us at our worst. Jesus' teachings and miracles are beautiful in themselves, but it his saving love for sinners that has propelled the gospel message around the globe. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

John 12:34-48—

So the crowd answered him, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?”

At this point Jesus is done answering questions of this sort. He stops the discussion and issues a warning—the darkness is coming.

³⁵So Jesus said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. ³⁷Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, ³⁸so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

³⁹Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

⁴⁰“He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.”

⁴⁸The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have

spoken will judge him on the last day.

There are two cautionary notes sounded in these verses. First: it is dangerous to substitute religious conversation for obedience. Engaging in one more debate when action is urgently required leads to a terrible outcome. “*We have heard from the Law . . . how can you say?*” is an attempt to have exactly this kind of unnecessary discussion. The Lord dismissed this question because the answers had already been given. Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.

The second caution comes in Jesus' quotation from Isaiah, the reference to a hardened heart and blinded eyes. Hardening in this context is not a fast freeze, it occurs stage by stage over time. Choices made repeatedly to disobey and dishonor God put us far from him. Because there is no single moment of stiff-necked defiance the trajectory may go unnoticed. We should take this danger seriously. God finally blinds and hardens those who have shown over time that they want nothing to do with him.

We will conclude here with a description of the kind of choice that leads to blindness.

John 12:42-43—

Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

‘Many authorities’ believed but refused to confess. They knew the truth but did not act on it because there was a price to pay—loss of the glory that comes from man. This tension is familiar to all of us and all will fail the test at times. Jesus said, “*Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*” May God strengthen us to choose to die to ourselves and to glorify God.