

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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Today's gospel reading jumped the gun in terms of the chronology leading up to Holy Week. You see, next week we'll gather outside to process with palms as we recall Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem before his betrayal, sham trial, and execution. But today's reading falls after Jesus' triumphal entry and before his betrayal. Today we focus on Jesus' final *public* discourse. The content of this discourse (and arguably the entire gospel of John) is summarized by a short, one sentence metaphor. Jesus said, "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."

Now, I must confess that while I was a biology major in undergrad, the biology class that I hated the most was botany. What I do remember from the class is that what we often call a seed has a few components. There is the embryo that will develop into a new plant; sometimes there is the endosperm, which is the food reserve for growth; and covering all of that is the seed coat. When a seed finds a niche exposed to enough moisture and warmth, germination can begin. This is when the seed coat breaks open and that dead exterior is tossed away. From there, roots usually grow down, and a shoot grows toward the light. // Hopefully I just made my botany professor happy.

Even if wasn't as precise about the biological process, the essence of what Jesus mentions today is that the seed's existence as a seed comes to an

end now that new life bursts forth. And, as the plant grows it produces more fruit and more seeds. It becomes full of life! // That is, in a seed coat, the mystery of our faith. At the core of our faith is the truth that in death there is life, in ending there is beginning, and that God will always go to unexpected lengths to reveal love, justice, and peace.

You see, Jesus' single sentence foreshadowed his death and resurrection, and it theologically illuminated how Jesus, indeed God, saw this act. Jesus' statement emphasized that this soon-to-be gruesome crucifixion was more about God's grace than about humanity's failure. As Rev. Mark Davis puts it, "Jesus dies, not to appease God's anger over human sinfulness, but because a death like his can be the means for bearing much fruit." And this theological truth is revealed throughout the scriptures. Time and again, we see that acts of loving generosity are the hallmark of Jesus' followers. We see that Jesus' life was centered on revealing God's nature as rooted in self-giving love. We come to understand that God became a servant to love and liberate a selfish people.

You see, when Jesus spoke about losing one's life, he was saying that individualism is not the way of Christ. Rather, following in Christ's footsteps is being like a seed that opens oneself up to live a life in community, to seek abundance, and to share gifts with others. The way of Christ is to strive to act for the community and not for the self. The way of Christ is about bringing God the glory or to put that another way, the way of Christ is about putting the vision of God first by loving God, loving your neighbor, and loving yourself. For the balance of the love of self and the love of other is what it means to bear fruit.

Here at Wicker Park Lutheran Church, we are striving to do that with our *A Place for All* campaign. During our Lent/Easter sermon series entitled “A Place” we are exploring how the text is calling us to make *a place* for something and to then reflect on how we at WPLC are striving to follow Christ’s example. Today’s gospel is calling us to imagine “A Place of Giving.” To imagine how God’s gift of reconciliation and love can be emulated here. And we do that not in such a way that we worship ourselves as a sacrificial gift, but rather, we strive to follow in Christ’s footsteps to point to the glory of God.

And it’s fortuitous that earlier this week I saw this image of a seed being broken open to reveal abundant life during our weekly meeting with the architect. You see, this last week we got the preliminary sketches from our structural engineer. Part of what they sketched was the new support structures that will be needed to create a hole in the fellowship hall to put in an elevator. They talked about the steel bracing, the new footers, and emphasized the large opening we’re making in the floor. And knowing the text for this week, I couldn’t help but see the opening of the floor to be like that seed coat. For 118 years, those floors stood strong in place. And then when the conditions were made just right, when the congregation had built up the energy, when the timing of the pandemic subsided, when the financial warmth began to grow, and the best possible location was found, that seed was prepared to burst open and birth new life. It’s a new life that isn’t for us sitting here. After all, we all tackled those stairs this morning to get in here. But it’s for those who are outside these walls and those who sit at home watching us this very morning hoping that one day they can wheel, shuffle, or maneuverer into this place to experience the life found here.

Our seed is about to burst open not for our own glory, but for the glory of revealing God's never-ending love and welcome. And will that new birth be different as the fellowship hall changes? Sure. And will that elevator be used for strollers or kitchen carts filled with treats? You bet 'cha! But what we acknowledge is that the seed that is at the cusp of busting forth is one that we are cultivating together as a community as a part of God's desire to create a place of giving, indeed a place given for all.

So as we continue today's service and we welcome ten new members, we welcome them into a place of giving. God has called us to create places that welcome, to create places that build community, and to create places that share God's love. So, in our journey during this Lent/Easter cycle, I pray that we remember our God's love for us without exception. I hope that we begin to envision how we might be able to partner with God by giving of ourselves, our church, and our space. I pray that we might know that we have a God who stops at nothing to tear open the containers that hold us back all for the sake of love. Amen.