

Life Transplant

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 5:(1-4)5-10, John 12:20-33, Psalm 51 or 51:11-16

St. David's Episcopal Church, Bean Blossom, Indiana

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John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Many of you have heard me talk before about my cousin, Neil Wohlford. Neil has been on our healing list since last November, when he entered the hospital to wait for a heart transplant, which finally came in January. During his long wait and his long recovery, Neil has kept a blog, or weblog, where he has been able to post updates on his condition as well as thoughts on his situation. He calls his blog "The Tin Woodman." Get it?

Early in his waiting period, Neil and his wife, Heather, spoke several times about the ghoulish feeling that they were, in a very real sense, waiting for someone to die so that Neil could live. Of course, they knew that people die in accidents every day, and that people would die whether or not Neil was waiting. Nonetheless, the situation made them painfully aware that death is necessary for life.

But, in fact, part of Neil had to die, too, so that he could move forward with a new life. He not only had to let go of his damaged heart, but he also had to let go of the person who he had become: tired, cautious, self-limiting. While waiting, Neil talked about the fact that, at thirty-four years old, he had to think about how he could get to and from work when he wasn't sure he could walk the city block between the subway station and his office. He hadn't realized how much he was compromising with his disease until the possibility of another way of living became available through the transplant. Now that he is at home, recovering from his surgery and taking small steps back toward full function, Neil has admitted that he is a little apprehensive – not really knowing what a normal life feels like, not knowing what this new self is capable of.

It is a theme of Lent that part of us has to die, that we must be able to let go of the things that get in the way, if we are to be able to live abundantly, as God wants us to live. Death is scary, especially when it is part of ourselves that we are letting go of. But we cannot live without death.

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.”

In fact, in a literal, physical sense, we are all dying right now, every day. We all lose something like 100,000 cells per second in a process scientists call “apoptosis,” or “falling away.” These little deaths are not just an unfortunate reality, but are absolutely crucial – old cells that have served their purpose dying and making way for new, fresh cells, so that by some estimates, our bodies are completely regenerated every seven years. Cells that don’t die off, that don’t get out of the way gracefully; these cells become what we know as cancer.

Death is critical to life in the natural world. For many plants and animals, death comes soon after reproduction. Flowers drop their seeds and wither. Salmon spawn, lay their eggs and die. Mayflies live their adult lives in a day. Something deep inside the blueprint of each of these beings knows that they must die and get out of the way if they are not going to compete with their own children, with the new life that is within them.

Jesus says, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

To hate our life. This doesn’t mean to really dislike the way things are going for us, like a whiny teenager. When scripture talks about loving one thing and hating another, what we need to hear is to love the second thing less than the first. In scriptural language, we can only completely love one thing, so to love something is to make it the center of our life. To hate something is to move it out of the center, to make it less important than the thing we love. To hate our life, we have to put our own self-preservation and self-importance second in line behind love of God.

But self-preservation is pretty important to most of us. Human beings will do pretty remarkable things just to be able to stay alive, as a whole genre of disaster movies and adventure stories will witness. But maybe we’re focusing on the wrong life, the wrong self to preserve.

Jesus says, “Those who hate their life in this world will keep it.” What is our life in this world?

Our life in this world is the life that is defined by the rules and expectations of the world. Our life in this world is the life that can be judged by the world’s categories of “successful,” “smart,” “attractive.” Our life in this world is the life that clutches more to itself out of a fear of scarcity, that does more out of a fear of failure, that defends out of a fear of being wounded. And yet our life in this world will continue to feel as though we never have enough, as though we’ve never done enough, as though we’re never safe enough, because our life in this world is an illusion that we’ve created. Our life in this world is sin.

Jesus is offering us an exchange: our life in this world for eternal life, our life as it exists in God. Our life in God is the life that is defined by God’s love for us. Our life in God is living as the people that God calls us to be. Our life in God is a life that knows that we have enough, we’ve done enough, we’re safe enough,

because it's not up to us. Our life in God is real life, lived abundantly, giving abundantly, giving thanks abundantly, loving abundantly.

Jesus is offering to exchange our lives of illusion for real life. It would seem like this is a bargain that wouldn't take much selling. But the fact is, we're so wrapped up in our life of illusion and sin, our life in this world, that on our own we can't even understand that the deal is available, can't even see what is being offered. On our own, illusion and sin look like all there is.

Jesus says, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." The word used here for "draw" can be literally translated "to drag," or specifically, "to haul forcibly." It is the same word used earlier in John when Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me."

Jesus is not just making an offer. Jesus is dragging us to himself, kicking and screaming. Jesus knows our weakness, he knows the illusions we live with, he knows that we cannot see beyond sin without God's help. So Jesus knows that he will be lifted up from the earth, high on the cross, to expose the sin of this world. He knows that he will be raised on the third day to show that sin and death do not have the last word. Jesus draws us to himself to see that there is life beyond the illusions that we've created.

What Jesus is offering us is a life transplant. He is offering us a way to let go of the cancerous, self-serving, self-deluding life that we know. Jesus is showing us the abundant, God-given life that has always been available to us. Jesus is showing us just how much we have compromised with our disease of sin, just how sick and distorted our lives have become, by showing us what real life is supposed to look like. Jesus is showing us that we have to be willing to die if we truly want to live.