

The Seed that Falls
(John 12:20-29)

3/23/25
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You will have heard by now that I have decided to retire early this summer, about 10 weeks from now. I want you to know how grateful I am for the privilege of serving you here, and there will be time after Easter to say more about it. But until then we have a spiritual journey to make together.

I chose a different Gospel reading for today, because I know that my announcement will be fresh in your minds. I chose Chapter 12, specifically verse 24, in the Gospel of John because it addresses endings and beginnings, and it does so in a way that resonates with with the main message of Lent and Easter.

Verse 24 is where Jesus says, “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

Jesus is referring poetically to his coming death and resurrection as a kind of falling away that will lead to a greater life.

Two Ways to Think of Faith

As we journey through life, I think that there are two ways we can think about what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus. These two ways often appear before us like a fork in the road that leads in

two directions. And either can be the faithful path to take, depending on the situation. And it is left to us to decide which is the better path.

Holding Fast

The first path in the fork is the path of “not letting go.” We walk this path by holding fast to our faith as the way of life that has been handed down to us and that has provided us and our community with a safe and rewarding journey through life.

And we hold fast by gathering each week to remember and recite our shared story of how God has been with us through thick and thin and how we have prospered as a people because we have stuck to our covenantal commitment to love God and each other.

Covenant means being there for each other in time of need and being in readiness even when there isn’t a need. If flood waters come upon us, we come together to hold the line, filling sandbags or preparing food and handing out blankets to provide relief. And we do these things because we are the children of a God who catches us when we fall. And so we are there for each other as God is for us.

So there are these shared commitments that we hold fast to as an expression of our faith, just as the seed holds fast to the sheaf of

wheat or just as the apple clings to the branch that has fed and nourished it. And without these commitments our communities fall apart and we fall separately to the ground, where we lay rotting in useless isolation.

The Cross

The cross that Jesus calls each one of us to take up during this season of Lent is all about “holding fast” to our covenantal commitments. And walking with Jesus through Lent includes being very conscious of the personal cost.

Sometimes, like Christ, we feel the agony of being pinned down, as Christ was pinned to the cross, as though our lives are the opposite of free, because the needs of those we care for never seem to end. And we cry out with him, “Take this cup away from me!” And yet, “not my will, but thine be done.”

And yet, as Christ has promised, there is also great personal reward in persevering along this path. That reward is the experience of God’s love, which comes upon us as an explosion of grace. That explosion of love changes everything. It redeems us and gives us a place in Christ’s resurrection. And somehow that experience only comes to those who have suffered and made sacrifices for the sake of others.

Ironically, when we willingly allow ourselves to be pinned to our responsibilities, as Christ was pinned to the cross, do we discover love and with that love our true freedom. (When we suffer on our cross with Christ, it is a “redemptive suffering.”)

Letting Go

But what about the other fork in the road? This second path is also a path of true faith, even though it seems to lead us in an opposite direction. it is the path of ‘letting go.’ And it is this path that Jesus is referring to, in this morning’s Gospel, when he describes the seed that must fall from the sheaf and die, so that new seeds can sprout.

You could also say that we are like apples, who must be able to let go of the branch that has fed us for a season. And we must let go with faith that we are not putting an end to ourselves by doing so:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Jesus asks, “And yet not one falls to the ground apart from the Father’s care”

And, we must let go so that something new can come into being that will not come into being until we do.

There is also redemptive suffering in taking this path. Consider how, when Jesus called his disciples to follow him, they immediately dropped everything and left their communities and families behind.

When you think about it, it seems like a pretty irresponsible thing to do and it could not have happened without creating some confusion and suffering.

In fact, the disciples themselves were pretty uncomfortable about it, and they wanted Jesus to at least give them time to go back and wrap things up, but he wouldn't allow it.

So why did Jesus make them choose between himself and the covenantal bonds that held them to their community and families? That's a tough question to explore at another time.

But for today, Jesus assures us that a seed must fall to the ground in order that it may sprout in the soil and produce a greater yield.

Likewise, a high school student must somehow drop away from the family tree in order to discover the independence of mind that marks adulthood. Likewise, a person who has experienced grief and loss must at some point, let go and turn to the future. Likewise, a person who has fed off a desire for vengeance, must let go and forgive in order to move on. Likewise, a person who is aging must recognize his frailties and finally let go of the career from which he has derived

his self-worth. And finally, we must all let go of this earthly life and turn toward the promise of heaven.

The initial moment when we let go and enter into free fall is surely a frightening moment. We have all experienced it. And the free fall can even turn out to be long and anxious. Sometimes in life, it seems as though one misfortune follows another and another and another and you start to wonder whether anything good will ever happen to break your fall.

And that is when it is important to have faith that God has ordained that the freefall will somehow end well. That no matter what is happening; no matter how helpless we may feel, that God will catch us and plant us where we need to be, and where his abundant grace and love will be made apparent.

Sometimes when we come to a fork in the road; a fork in which one path requires us to “hold fast” and the other bids us to “let go.” The message today is that both are necessary and vital paths by which to live a life of faith. And when we come to such a fork, it is up to us to look into our hearts and decide which path God is calling us to take.