

Synod Assembly 2017
Opening Worship sermon
Is 43:16-19
2 Cor 5:14-19
John 12:20-26

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator and the Lord Jesus. Amen.

A colleague tells the story of his days as a campus pastor at a university on the East Coast. He received a panicked phone call one day from the father of one of the students in his ministry. The dad said, “Pastor, you’ve got to talk to Emily! She’s got this crazy idea of dropping out of school, and it just doesn’t make sense! She’s a straight A student, hard worker, got a brilliant career in business ahead of her – and she wants to throw it all away and drop out! You’ve got to go talk to her!”

So the pastor went to see Emily. “Emily, what’s this I hear – you’re dropping out? Why? You’re a straight A student with a brilliant business career in your future, and you’re dropping out of university? Why? What are you thinking?” Emily explained that, yes, she was going to drop out so she could work with communities in Third World countries battling poverty.

“Emily,” the pastor said, “what in the world made you think it would be a good idea to give up your schooling and go do that?”

“Well,” she said, “the idea came to me when I heard you preach your sermon about giving up what you have and following Jesus.”

“Good Lord,” the pastor said, “I didn’t think you’d take me seriously! What about your schooling?”

“Well,” she said, “maybe Jesus wanted to accomplish more with your sermon than you did.”

When the Living Word speaks a word, anything can happen. The Living Word that is Jesus Christ is creative and creating, always working to bring about God’s purposes on earth, and constantly generating the Spirit-filled life that surges through the Church. We celebrate that Living Word at this assembly as we continue our exploration of the synod-wide theme of HOPE. We’re looking at HOPE in four dimensions: leadership, stewardship, discipleship and evangelism; or Lead, Give, Grow, and Share. In synod assemblies, bishop’s convocations, and area ministry visits we concentrate on one dimension per year. We’ve already focused on leadership and stewardship, and this year we begin our work with discipleship. This is our Grow year.

Exactly *how* will we grow as faithful followers of Jesus Christ? That's the question we'll engage throughout this year. *How*, not *if*. Jesus doesn't call us to "if"; through the Resurrection Jesus calls us to "therefore" and "how" – Christ is raised from the dead; *therefore, how* will we follow him? Our guide will be the Living Word himself, who comes among us tonight with the very practical word that "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain."

Death is not our favorite topic; in fact, we'd rather deny that reality altogether. Experts in the fields of psychology and anthropology tell us our unconscious avoidance of the topic dictates much of the way we live our lives. Cover it up and it's not there. That might explain why we spend \$13 billion a year on plastic surgery.

But sometimes we can't avoid the subject. In our Gospel lesson tonight Jesus confronts his friends with the approach of his own death now that it's clear that Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God has begun to spread well beyond the bounds of Israel and there's no stopping its advance. The mission is in motion. Time now to realize the work of salvation. To tell the disciples how that was going to happen, for the mission to flourish, for the Kingdom to advance, for salvation to be accomplished, Jesus tells the fundamental fact that growth involves death: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain." But he doesn't leave it at that, as if death has the last word. "But if it dies," he says, "it bears much fruit."

There's plenty of evidence in the Gospel of John to suggest that the disciples of Jesus didn't understand what he was talking about. It took a while for it to sink in, for their experience to confirm what they had heard. But sooner or later, his followers not only got the message; it got them. That's what we hear in Paul's words to his church in Corinth: "... we are convinced that one (Jesus) has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

So what was the impact of the Resurrection on daily life for these people? It changed everything. "We regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

For the early followers of Jesus, the Resurrection changed everything indeed, most of all *themselves*. They left behind old ways of thinking, old ways of behaving, old ways of interacting with one another and with the world at large. In order to step into the light of the Resurrection and live as redeemed people who actually belong to Christ, the old ways had to go.

It's a fact of life, isn't it, that if we're going to make progress and follow a path we believe to be faithful, to move from where we are into the future, we have to let some things go. When two of our seminaries on the East Coast made the decision to form one seminary on two campuses, it marked a distinct advance into the future in terms of financial viability and more efficient delivery of high-quality theological education; but that advance required difficult and painful reductions in staff and faculties. When two people decide to realize the joys of marriage they also get ready to bid farewell to at least part of life as they've known it as single people. Growth requires change.

"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." As we begin this year of Discipleship we're going to invite, encourage, and equip you for greater fruit-bearing as followers of Jesus. What that will mean for you and your church or ministry setting will be different, depending on you and your church or ministry setting. But one fact remains true across the board: greater fruit-bearing will mean that something has to change.

So, right here in the middle of the sermon, two questions to deal with at your tables, two questions to help us make progress as people of faith who are held together not by our agreement on issues but only by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They'll take a good deal of honesty, and courage. At our tables we'll take four minutes for conversation after the first question, and this is it: What needs to die in my congregation in order for us to be a more faithful Church? What traditions or rituals or attitudes get in the way of my congregation living the life of Jesus in the world? At each table you'll find an envelope containing blue and yellow cards. On the blue card please note your response, then place those responses in the offering plate at this worship service. Again, here's the question: What needs to die in my congregation in order for us to be a more faithful Church? Those responses will be used in the presentation tomorrow.

(4 minutes)

Thank you. Here's your second question, but this one is for each of you, individually. I ask that you record your responses, anonymously, on the yellow cards at each table. We won't be collecting those; they're for you alone. Here's your question: What has to die *in me* in order that I might be a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ?

As I think about that question for myself, I realize that when I have trouble connecting with another person it's usually because I want to be in charge, I want to be right. So for me what has to die in order for me to be a more faithful follower of Jesus is my need to win, to be right. That's what I need to do business with in my life. What is it for you? What needs to die in you in order that you might be a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ? We'll take 2 minutes for this one.

(2 minutes)

Now, this is going to call for some moving around. I'd like you to get out of your seat and find someone you don't know – a total stranger but, keep in mind, a brother or sister in Christ – and tell him or her what you've written in answer to that second question. Sometimes it's easier to be totally honest with a total stranger. I'll call us back together in a few minutes.

(10 minutes)

Making progress can be hard. And if you think that growing as disciples of Jesus, in our churches and in our own selves, is too hard; if you think that it's *too* much of an uphill climb, that the traditions are *too deeply* engrained, the attitudes *too* entrenched, the risks *too* great, the costs *too* high, the losses *too* unacceptable, that it just *can't be done* – you're absolutely right, except for one fact:

We're stuck with Easter.

We're stuck with the fact that God's desire for our salvation is greater than the power of death itself. If God raised Jesus from the dead, who are we to say that our own growth as disciples is out of God's reach?

We just concluded the season of Easter and have moved on into Pentecost. But honestly, Easter is never over. God is always about to do a new thing and, in fact, *is* doing that new thing even now – can you perceive it? *God* perceives it, and God perceives it in *you*. So Christ is always risen, Christ is always at work, Christ is always responding to uncertainty with confidence, fear with hope; always calling us to new life in him, because, remember: everything old has passed away; see, everything – and everyone – has become new!

Amen.