

## “The Paradox of the Grain of Wheat”

John 12:20 – 33

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In order to understand the New Testament, one would do well to pursue a degree in agriculture or horticulture or agronomy, or animal science. Anyone raised on a farm or at a vineyard has a head start in opening up the wisdom of Scripture. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all use images and metaphors from the world of agriculture to illustrate eternal truths.

I had no idea what Jesus meant when he said, “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is unfit for the kingdom of heaven,” until I lived in a farming community where the proper plowing of a field means the difference between eating and not eating. I had no idea what Jesus meant by having a shepherd leave ninety nine sheep in a corral while he went looking for the one that was lost until I served in a church where the economy was driven by the price of wool. I had no idea what was going on with all those stories where people are gathered at a well, until I lived in a village where people walk more than a mile to pump their water by hand for the day’s demands. If we could all spend even one day on a local farm, we’d gain enormous insight into the truths of the Bible.

In our lesson for today, we find Jesus already realizing that his time on earth is drawing to a close; his window of opportunity for training his disciples is narrowing. We can almost picture him searching frantically for an image of the Gospel that is both commonly available and readily understood; an image that will carry the profound nature of God’s redeeming love into the indefinite future. He doesn’t have time to create a lovely work of art or to publish a book or even to design a tee shirt.

He looks out the window and sees a farmer planting grain. He watches the farmer scatter the seed and cover it with earth. He turns to his friends and offers them this paradox: 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.

These disciples, having been around planting and harvesting all their lives, know exactly what he is talking about. It is not a lesson in farming. It is a lesson in the essential quality of love.

A grain of wheat that is never planted in the soil is love that is never shared. A grain of wheat that is never planted is a tragedy because it never discovers its true identity. A grain of wheat that is never planted is robbed of its full potential to feed a hungry community.

Love that is never invested in another human being is a tragedy because the person who withholds love never discovers who he or she truly is. Love that is never invested in another human being is a tragedy because its potential to bring that other person to life is snuffed out.

By its very nature, a kernel of grain is meant to be planted. Being planted is what God has in mind for it! It is by surrendering itself to the soil that it explodes into a fine harvest. By its very nature, love is meant to be shared. Being shared is what God has in mind for it! It is by surrendering itself to the neighbor that love multiplies the gladness of the world.

So, Jesus seizes upon an image from agriculture to train his disciples in what they need to know in order to keep the Gospel message alive. They are to love with all they've got. Holding back on love is like hoarding milk in the refrigerator well past its expiration date. It curdles. It turns sour. It doesn't do anybody any good.

When I was a child, I was fascinated by sand castles and moats and drawbridges. I thought it would be smart to add alligators to the moats to make the castles even more impenetrable. As an eight year old, I thought to myself, ‘This is the way to live one’s life, insulated from the rest of the world.’ And I thought if I lived in such a castle, it would be a rare day that I’d lower the draw bridge to let anyone come in. I had a well developed fantasy built up around castle living.

No one bothered to explain to me that castle living is like holding the grain of wheat tightly in the hand. Castle living may feel secure, in a way, but it misses the boat when it comes to experiencing what life and love are all about! The Gospel does not invite us into castle living, segregating ourselves from the neighbor. The Gospel invites us to live with the drawbridge permanently in the open position, seeing the neighbor as one waiting to be loved.

I took the image of castle living with me to college. I clung to that image until one night I went to a slide show offered by two female students: Sylvia Elam and Nancy Nichols. It was an unlikely way for a college man to spend a Friday night. But there I was in the audience watching pictures of Sylvia and Nancy on their summer exchange adventure with Operation Crossroads Africa. The slides basically revealed what happens when ordinary people let down the drawbridge and start to love the neighbor. The pictures spoke for themselves. In a single evening, the castle-living image evaporated from my mind and from my soul, never to return again. I date my awakening to the thrill of loving to that evening with the slide show from Cameroon and Ghana with Nancy and Sylvia.

What I know now is that the only way I can know who I am is by loving other people. The true benefit from loving another is the discovery of the person God created us to be.

Finally, I will be forever grateful to Rabbi David Levy, formerly of Congregation Kol Havarim. Over lunch one day, just a few years ago, we talked about the meaning of giving alms to the poor. I had always felt compassion for the poor and so I entered into that conversation with ease. But the rabbi took the conversation to a level I had not anticipated. He said it is not enough to give a poor person something to eat or something to wear. We have to give that person enough such that he or she then has something to give to another. Otherwise, he said, we may be satisfying his hunger or his nakedness, but we have not satisfied the soul's longing to discover one's true humanity. Such a discovery comes only with the giving of what we have.

For me, the same is true with love. We need to be so generous with our love, in part because it holds the potential to transform our neighbor, but also because by so giving of it we discover, finally, our true humanity.

I believe this is what Jesus had in mind when he said, "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." This reflection I share with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen.