

Sermon for Sunday, Mar 17, 2024 Lent V

Your Vestry spent much of yesterday with me as we reflected on the parish and how we define our values, our traditions, our dreams, and our priorities. We used the metaphor of the parish as a “Tree of Life,” a very familiar one in the Christian tradition. We explored our values (the trunk of the tree), the values that we lift up as being particularly part of the fabric of Christ and Grace. We named our roots, the source of our values. We thought of our leaves, the people present and gone to a farther shore who demonstrated, taught or inspired our values. We imagined the very dirt beneath our feet that supports the tree that is Christ and Grace, the feeds us, and holds us up when the storms surround us. We envisioned the fruit this tree had and would continue to bear in terms of hopes, dreams, wishes and legacies.

We talked as well about the compost heap, that wonderful place where we put the remainders of things that are no longer useful in the current environment, so that they might be digested and then feed the future.

I know this sounds very strange and overly metaphorical, but it yielded a rich conversation about what is life-giving, what is transformational in our community, what connects us to each other, and what is ready to be done.

This metaphor of planting is one that is present in this Gospel, where Jesus, as he enters the final phase of his ministry, considers himself and his message as a grain of wheat. It’s an unusual response to Andrew and Philip, who have come looking for him to talk with some Greeks who showed up and were curious about Jesus. He doesn’t say “bring those Greek fellows over here, all are welcome to hear my words.” He doesn’t say “how did they hear about me?” Instead he talks about his impending death, and he talks about his ministry as a starting point, something that will grow. He gives them an image. A single grain of wheat. A small and fragile thing, that.

One single grain of wheat. He says, unless a single grain of wheat that falls into the earth is willing to open its covering layer – to allow itself to die to its existence as a grain of wheat- and is touched by the deep warm damp soil, so that it can germinate, it cannot bear fruit. It must die to live again, to become something fruitful. He must die so that something can grow.

We do not know if the Greeks who were looking for Jesus and asked Andrew and Philip to find him actually did hear this strange message. But we do know that Jesus' words about dying so that one might live again are ones that resonate for any gardener.

Each December, I pull my potted amaryllis bulbs out of the cold storage. Their green leaves spend the summer in my garden, gathering up energy from the sun and rain. And then they go dormant, and are sad shriveled brown things when I uncover them. Anyone seeing them in that state would conclude that they are dead. They certainly do look that way. And then, with warmth and water and a sunny window, they start to grow again, and eventually to bloom gloriously. They are, in a word, resurrected from the dead.

Jesus' language of dying to the present world to be resurrected in another one is an agrarian metaphor, and it would make sense to people to whom he preached – they were agrarian people. To us it is more obscure, but we start to get it as we reflect upon it, just as your Vestry started to get it as we reflected on our parish as our Tree of Life.

Losing one's life for the gospel is a reminder that resurrection – from the God's first creation through all the cycles of human existence – is vegetal: We live and die in Christ because, like plants, we believe in Christ's promise of renewed life. It places us firmly in the midst of the here and now and the eternal promise of resurrection.

We are the rootstock of this parish; we are the bearer of values and hopes, we are the legacy that future generations will build this church on, because we are resurrection people. We live for a time, but this place, this parish, is the soil for the church of a decade from now, a century from now, a place for resurrection of dreams and possibilities and transformation. That is what the Vestry talked about yesterday, and it is what we must do ourselves, dying to the old vision of what church is and imagining what can help us do more, be more, to grow in the time ahead.

That knowledge will keep us strong as we walk the passion of Christ to the Cross, and we see how truly broken things can be, but like the shriveled brown bulbs of

the amaryllis, like the volunteer shoots of a tree that has been cut down, we can rise again to become the strongest and wisest of trees.

It is a hard thing, at the end of the summer, when I cut back the brown and wilted leaves of the amaryllis bulb. I remember how beautiful it was and I wonder what will come of it next year. But I know that for it to grow into a new flower, it must go into a time of dormancy and reimagining, in its plant-y way, what it can grow into in the next growing season. So we, too, are called by God to a time of reflection and reimagining so that we can flower in wonderful new ways for the future that God intends for us.

Yes, that sounds a little daunting. It sounds like it was daunting for Jesus, too, who said “my soul is troubled,” but immediately followed it with the words “it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

Our purpose as a parish is more than just bare survival. Our purpose is to be a transformative presence, in our own hearts and souls, and in our community. Imagine what that might look like, built on the same values that have always sustained us but in new forms that address our current world, our current neighborhood.

Wilted leaves may be cut back so that a new flower can emerge. Old traditions may be reshaped to new needs. We can do this, and we must, because God continually invites us into a new way of being the church. May we rise to the challenge with joy and trust in our Lord, who stepped into the task set before him knowing, despite it all, that this is what his Heavenly Father asked him to do. We can, and we will, with God’s help.

Amen.