

## Lent 5, Year B

March 18, 2018

John 12:20 *Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsa'ida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 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. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. 27 "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. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.*

Garrison Keillor tells the story about Anonymous McBride, a Baptist preacher who had a specialty: he was very skillful at making Methodists and Episcopalians uneasy about their baptism. He persuaded lots of them that unless they went altogether underneath the water, they were lost souls. Every Sunday afternoon down at the Chattahoochie River, he re-baptized ten or fifteen folks.

Everything was going well until he met a Methodist lady named Raynelle Roberts. He persuaded her that baptism by sprinkling was deficient, and scheduled her for underwater baptism the following Sunday afternoon. But Raynelle's desire for re-baptism was exceeded only by her fear of water. She happened to have a son who had been in the Navy. He had brought home one of those Navy life jackets. Raynelle took the floatation material out of that life jacket and sewed it on the inside lining of her dress. Because she was a large lady, a few extra bulges were not noticeable. Then on a memorable Sunday afternoon that folks still talk about in Georgia, Raynelle was led into the water by Anonymous. After speaking the words of ritual, he tried to immerse Raynelle; but he couldn't get her under. Anonymous was determined and a great struggle ensued. It looked like a couple of hippos out there, bobbing up and down. Now, the current in the Chattahoochie is rather swift. In the midst of the baptismal struggle, Raynelle got loose from Anonymous. Off she went down the river. She was last seen going round the bend as the choir sang, "In the Sweet By and By."<sup>1</sup>

I love that story, not simply because it's funny, but because I can identify with Raynelle.

St. Paul writes: “We were buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too should begin living a new life... Our old self was crucified with him, so that the self which belonged to sin would be destroyed...”<sup>2</sup> But *my* old self, my ego self, my false self, is much like Raynelle: it doesn’t want to go under the water. I want the new life of grace without having the old self die.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus says: “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.” Biblical scholar Gail O’Day notes that “‘fruit’ is Jesus’ metaphor for the life of the *community* of faith.”<sup>3</sup> Fr. John Shea expands this interpretation even further, saying that the “fruit” which comes from the death of the single, individual, separate seed is that much larger, expansive spiritual community which is forged with God and others who live in God, when we give up our identification with the individualistic self. It’s not that we give up our God-given uniqueness as individuals; it’s that we stop **identifying** ourselves as totally separate from God and from others, stop **identifying** completely with our outward, surface, “ego” selves, disconnected from that larger, spiritual community.

Dr. Shea writes: “If people identify with their individual lives as *separate* beings, they will lose that life. Death will eventually take it from them. But if they do *not identify* with separate individual life, the death of that life becomes a stage in a process of transformation. Death is not a loss but a transition into eternal life. The actual death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus will definitively reveal this truth.

“But this truth is already present in the consciousness of [the *earthly*] Jesus. He **has** disidentified with his separate life and centered himself in ... communion with his Father *and* his followers.”<sup>4</sup> And **we** are called to this same process, in the here and now, before our physical deaths – called to this transformation of consciousness, disidentifying with individual, separate life and centering ourselves in the holy communion between God and people, which is the very definition of fruitful life.

It isn’t easy. Jesus himself says, “Now my soul is troubled.” “The prospect of losing individual selfhood always produces fear and anxiety,” writes Fr. Shea. “Jesus is not an exemption.”<sup>5</sup> But notice how Jesus reasons: “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.’” Jesus recognizes and experiences the human fear of disidentifying with the individual self. But he also **knows** that *fruitful* life, *true* life, is to be found in union with God and one another, not in the individualistic self. The Father’s name is glorified as we come to live out our lives more and more in the community of God/self/neighbor, letting go of our identification with the singular self. We manifest divine love when we center

ourselves in the holy communion between God and people. We can assuage the fear if we see the process of dying as *transformation* rather than extinction.

In order for a seed to produce fruit, Jesus says, it has to die. It is a theme Jesus repeats over and over again in the Gospels: whoever would save their life must lose it, and whoever loses their life will save it. Or as today's Gospel puts it, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." We die to our false, individualistic selves *now*, so that when we eventually physically die, the false self is already gone. As Fr. Shea puts it, "Die *before* you die so when you die, you won't die." <sup>6</sup>

He illustrates this statement with a story which is found in various forms in many different traditions:

A rich and generous man freely gave gold to various groups of people. On one day it would be widows; another day, it would be invalids; another day it would be poor students, etc. The only requirement was that the recipients should wait in silence. Not all could meet that requirement.

When it was the day for lawyers to receive gold, one lawyer pleaded his case with great gusto before the rich and generous man. The rich and generous man simply passed by. The next day the designated group was the lame. So the lawyer wrapped splints around his legs and posed as a cripple. The rich and generous man recognized him immediately and passed by. The following day the group was widows. The lawyer disguised himself as a widow. However, he did not fool the rich and generous man who passed by him without bestowing gold.

So the lawyer found an undertaker and concocted a plan. The undertaker would wrap him in a shroud and put him in the path of the rich and generous man. The rich and generous man would surely throw gold coins on the shroud for proper burial. The lawyer and the undertaker would split the money.

The rich and generous man **did** throw coins on the shroud. The lawyer's hand quickly broke through the shroud and grabbed the coins before the undertaker could run away with them. Then he emerged from his burial cloths and said to the rich and generous man, "Do you see at last how I have received from your generosity?"

"Yes," said the rich and generous man, "but first you had to die."

"The story suggests there are two dimensions to human beings. There is a surface dimension that is scheming and conniving to get what it wants by promoting itself and disguising itself. There is an argumentative lawyer in all of us. There is no end to our machinations on this level. We are continually exerting our will to get what we want.

"But there is a deep dimension that is able to receive gold from someone who is both rich and generous by simply being silently present. The rub is that we must die to the schemer to become the receiver. It is the posture of silence that allows

us to receive the gold that the rich and generous One wants to give. As [the poet] Rumi says: “the mystery of ‘Die before you die’ is this: / that the gifts come after your dying and not before. / Except for dying, you artful schemer, / no other skill impresses God” (*Mathnawi* 6.3837-40 in Helminski, 128).<sup>7</sup>

Except for dying, you artful schemer, / no other skill impresses God.

“The thrust of this teaching is: if death is a transformative process, get a head start. At death the scheming and conniving self who manipulates the world to get its desires will fall away. The deeper self who in its very being is receiving love from God and passing it on to others will emerge. As St. Paul might say, ‘**now** is the time’ (see 2 Cor 6:2) to practice letting go of the schemer and surrendering into the receiver. Why wait?”<sup>8</sup>

Remove the flotation liner from your clothing – all of those things which keep you bobbing on the surface of life, swept along with the swift current of our culture. Remove the flotation liner, and let the waters of your baptism do their work.

AMEN

- 1 citation lost
- 2 Romans 6:4, 6
- 3 Gail O’Day, *John, New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 9*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 711)
- 4 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 101
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 102
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 104
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 104
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 105