

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Creator, knower of us all, like the Jews of the past, like the Greeks of Old, like the tax collectors and the sinners the world rejected, we still seek you today. Sometimes we see where you work as clear as day; sometimes we have to look deeper. Holy one, when we look for you in convenience, help us to go deeper. Help us to seek sacrifice, to seek the benefit of our neighbor, not merely our own benefit. Help us not to seek being pleased as pleasing others. Help us not want but fulfill others' needs. Help us to be disciples of true seeking, not disciples of convenience. Fill us that we may fill others, all for your Glory. Hear all on our hearts and minds; make us your tools for transformation.

Help us, God, in this time of Lent, to not settle for easy discipleship. We seek the path of Jesus, the only path where we can find fulfillment and true salvation. We are but grains of seed, seed that has the potential to grow into a great bounty. But, Holy God, you remind us that new life does not come from life; new life requires that we must experience a death. The Lord Jesus came that he might literally die and raise again; we have the opportunity to die to so many things: selfishness, self-righteousness, anxiety, ignorance, self-importance, and rise to the new life that may consistently glorify Christ. God, in these final days of Lent, let us look intentionally at the ways that we must die to ourselves and to our desires that we may rise again to new life in you. We pray for the responsibility of discipleship. Indeed, we pray all these things in the name of the one who died that we might live, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one people, in all times, in all places...

SERMON

As someone who came from Nebraska, you are supposed to know something about agriculture. Indeed, I've learned a lot from a father who farmed until he couldn't anymore

and an uncle who still is a tenacious farmer. More than one summer I went out working on the family farm, doing whatever needed to be done. One of the biggest tasks was laying irrigation pipe. More than one Fourth of July were we out on the farm doing just that. If you're not familiar, it's not an easy task. You are out at the peak of the day on one of the hottest days of the year. It's even worse in Nebraska, with the nearly 100% humidity every day. First, you load it on the trailer, then you follow behind the tractor moving along at a couple miles per hour, pick up one end of a pipe, pull it out, and lay it down along the path. You then keep going. When you're done, you have to go back and attach all that pipe together, piece by piece, and check out if any of the water gates need repairing, which usually comes on each length.

It's a big and tiring job to lay the pipe and everything that goes with it. Obviously, that irrigation pipe was always a testament to the crops we were trying to grow. We put in a lot of work for what, in particular? All for the benefit of a little seed and what it can become with a little nurturing. In a way, that's what we are doing here today. We aren't here to sing hymns or listen to a sermon or to hear scripture or to greet one another and talk about what's on our minds. Those are individual tasks that have little meaning by themselves. Together and with the right intentions, they have all the meaning in the world. We are here to lay the pipe for something greater than simple fellowship or singing. It takes a lot of work to lay the pipe of the church, but we do it for important reasons. Ultimately, we are here to do the work of God, to worship God and prepare for God's ministry, and when those tasks are used in combination with the right intentions, then the seed can be empowered to grow something much, much greater. It works in the field; it works in the church as well when we put in a lot of work and trust the greater architect.

We are nearing the home stretch of Lent in our time, and in scripture, Jesus is nearing the trials and tribulations of Holy Week. Even so, there are still lessons to learn from his journey. At this point in the Gospel of John, Jesus is going to a festival, and some Greek people wish to see him. Jesus responds in an important and unique way. He doesn't just greet the Greeks; he recognizes that this is an important time in his life and the growth of this new faith. It's not just about his band anymore; the message is becoming much greater and more widespread than it began. With that message growing, the stakes grow stronger for the disciples and for Jesus. From the new insights along the way come a new teaching that has great implications for the Christ and for us. Let us look back at this important passage from John and see this new teaching, a teaching that comes from a seed but means everything to us as disciples for this time.

You can't help but think that the timing for such a big announcement seems strange. Some Greeks come to see Jesus, but these are not just any Greek peoples. According to the New Interpreter's Commentary, these are the first Gentiles to come and seek Jesus' word. These are the first non-Jewish peoples who have heard about his message and want to follow him. This seems minor in the grand scheme of Jesus' ministry, as people are coming to Jesus and then going on and on, right? But this is a very big event, and Jesus knows it. This is the beginning of Jesus' (and the church's) ministry to the Gentiles, the beginning of new life being offered to all people, not just the Jews. His message tells the story and a warning of what is to come: "The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." This requires a special teaching, a teaching with great implications. What he says afterwards applies to his ministry and the ministry of us all. How do we fully be in ministry? How do we be disciples? "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.” He is foretelling what is about to happen to him but just as much what we should do if we wish to follow in Jesus Christ’s footsteps. It is not an easy message whatsoever.

But let’s look at this idea of a grain of wheat. What’s the big deal? The Grain of Wheat is a seed; it is the beginning of the wheat plant. We think of a seed as little and of little consequence. It in itself has not yet reached its potential. In order for a seed to take hold, it has to be planted in the earth. But when that happens, there are two ways it can go. It can continue to be a seed sitting in the ground, or it can follow the more important path: a seed has to give up all of itself. A seed has to relinquish all that it is, but when it does, it is not an ending; it is a new beginning. From the seed’s sacrifice of itself, a new plant comes into being, and from that plant, there comes to be more seeds, each with the potential to do the same thing. Before you know it, from one seed and its giving of itself, its death, a whole field can be grown and harvested. There is endless potential and possibility just from the growth of one little seed. This is an incredible, counterintuitive example from our daily lives, but it is just as apt a metaphor for the life of Jesus and for the church of today.

It took a lot for this small event of Greeks, the first non-Jews to come to him, to happen. Jesus gave so much already in his ministry, and he was foretelling that he was about to give absolutely all he had. He asks the same of us. And it all traces back to what he had to say. Jesus’ explanation and application of the example of the seed is simple: “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.” Jesus is outlining the path of discipleship. We tend to look at in the grand scheme of devoting one’s life to Jesus. That is true, but to look

at the greater scheme without looking at the small ways to manifest that is to neglect the overall message.

I don't think Jesus meant that we are to literally "hate" our lives but consider our own benefit as secondary to God's greater mission. What do we give for the benefit of God's ministry? It begins in these walls. One way the greater church of today has gone wayward is how we come to worship each Sunday. When the church of today comes to worship, it seeks its own benefit. The underlying message can easily be, sitting back in the pews, "Please me." It wants a show; it wants to be satisfied. The church can easily become like a customer service industry, in that we expect to have everything the way we want it or your money back. It's a subtle but absolutely dangerous message to God's purposes, for there is no room for God to work when #1 instead is the ego. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a name for this malady: "Cheap Grace." When the sum and total of God's message has become that God has saved me, no further action required, and there is no desire to deepen the relationship or to live a life of service in response, when the point has become about me and Jesus alone, then the point of grace has been lost. Church no longer becomes for God's glory but for our service.

There are so many ways to apply this everyday. For example, when you come to worship, what is your mindset? For what do we come to worship? Do you expect to be satisfied, or do you come to learn how to serve others? If we are here expecting a show to our convenience or looking to be satisfied by what you find in God's church, church has become more about us than it has God's service, and God has no room to work and help us grow in our daily lives. If there's anything we learn from this passage, it is that God's service requires personal sacrifice each and every day in big and small ways. The seed has

to die to itself in order for the bounty to grow. Jesus, the King of all, had to die in order that God's service might be done. Through his death, there came to be a harvest. Are you expecting to be the seed that sacrifices itself in order that a bounty can grow? Or are you here expecting to be pleased by what you find here?

I heard a sad story the other day from a fellow pastor who spoke at Subdistrict Conference. This pastor was speaking about the many avenues of discipleship and gave us some very important examples. He told the story of a pastor who preached a sermon, and after the service, the pastor was met by a congregation member who told him, "So what's the deal changing the rules?" The pastor was of course shocked by this question so asked him, "What rules are you speaking of?" The man responded, "I've been coming to this church for decades; I've been raised in this church, and never once has someone told me that I need to serve other people." That story shocked me and shocked so many other faithful pastors who would find someone telling them this to be heartbreaking. If one of you came to me after service and asked me something like this, I would feel like I had failed. If you do it after this service, I know you're just pulling my chain. Indeed, there is no greater message in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ than self-sacrifice and care for the other person, whether they are in this church or not. After all, we are here to live out this message each and every day. We are the seed, and the church is meant to be like that irrigation pipe, the fuel we need to grow each and every day. The fuel is for our growth, our nurturing, not to satisfy ourselves. It provides the tools we need to let go of our own egos and to give all to Christ everyday. Indeed, each of the things we partake in the church should lead us to a greater sense of giving of ourselves. Within the confines of community can we better become disciples when we hold each other to mutual accountability.

I find this an endlessly challenging passage, for we have to consistently die to all those things that we want for God's glory. My question for you today is: What must you let go of to be able to be the seed today, tomorrow, and everyday? It's not something we can necessarily answer on the spot. It takes some good reflection to understand what we have to let go of that we think please us to transform them into the benefit of others. It should start here. We must come to God's house to empower ourselves for the work ahead and the benefit of those who reside in these walls with us and those who do not. It is a challenging message, for the world around us tells us how we must always be pleased, we must get everything we want everywhere we go, and if we are not pleased, we must communicate our displeasure until it is made right. Here, we learn something different. No matter who you are, the pastor or the first time attendee, I cannot be a Christian, I cannot serve my Lord and Savior if we are not living up to this example together. I cannot succeed if you cannot succeed. I cannot follow Christ unless I give of myself each and every day, for only when we give everyday, only when we sacrifice of ourselves everyday do we die to ourselves and live in Christ. But we don't do it alone. We are interconnected; we are the Body of Christ, and that means we are in this together at every point in the journey.

This is a timely and important reminder that the Christian life requires sacrifice in order for the Christian life to be healthy. It requires we live into the image of that seed that dies of itself but fosters so much through its sacrifice. It helps grow and foster a greater purpose, that of growing wheat to be harvested in God's time. Let us set aside all distractions, all expectations of our service and devote our beloved God-given gifts to God's service that all might be cared for. Thanks be to God for the difficult way but the way that leads to life! Amen and amen.