

March 17 John 12:20-33 - Title: A Single Grain

There is a long standing and time-tested trope about fate. It usually goes something like this: someone received a prophecy that they will die at the hands of a certain object or person, and they fight against that fate, banishing said item or person, only to have this ultimately bring about their death anyone. A common one is of the wife who receives the prophecy that her husband's favorite cup will be his death, so she puts it on a high shelf so the husband can't find it. He flies into a rage and in the ensuing argument the cup falls on his head and kills him.

Another version of this is the goodly king who is told his own child will kill him. We see this in some versions of the legend of King Arthur. Mordred, Arthur's son of questionable birth, is fated to kill Arthur. To prevent this, Arthur orders the slaughter of innocents similar of Herod's order when Jesus was born; all the male infants of a certain age are put to death. Of course, Mordred survives and this attempt on his life only fosters bitterness and hate and he ultimately kills Arthur in battle.

The point of this trope is twofold. One, the more tightly you grip your life the less you live, and that fate can't be changed, only accepted. I don't know much about that last part, but the first is certainly true, the one who loves their life will lose it, and the one who is willing to lay down their life will find it.

There is a similar story to Arthur and Mordred's of a king who receives the prophecy his son is the one who will end his life, but this king does not love his own life so much that he is willing to commit murder to save it. Instead, he raises the child as any good father would. He refuses to do the boy any harm or treat him as anything but a beloved son. He keeps

his honor intact. Finally, the king is on his death bed and in great pain. His son is heartbroken to see such suffering and ends the king's life. Though the prophecy is the same in both stories, and both deal with matters of fate, the king who did not grasp so tightly to life is the one who found it in abundance.

We, too, can cling too tightly to life. I don't necessarily mean martyrdom, though. We can cling to the best life has to offer, to our luxuries, our convenience, our unlocked boat, and unstirred pot. Imagine one day you are sitting in your favorite spot, doing your favorite thing, and drinking your favorite beverage. For me, that would be in my favorite chair, probably reading or doing puzzles, and drinking coffee, preferably with a little luck of the Irish in it. Imagine, into that moment of comfort, you hear God calling you to a far-off land. Perhaps this place will not have favorite chairs, new books, or even coffee. Perhaps you would sleep under a mosquito net, or have limited washing up water. Perhaps the food would be unfamiliar to you and more of an acquired taste. We have a choice, then. We can cling to our comfort and our luxuries, pretend that we didn't hear, that we were going through a tunnel and the call dropped, or we can let go and allow ourselves to be planted somewhere new.

Sometimes it's not far off lands that Jesus calls us to. Sometimes it is to our own neighborhood.

One of the dating apps, Hinge, conducted a survey on Gen Z. That is the generation born roughly in the mid-90s to the 2010s. What they found was that Gen Z was more afraid of rejection than previous generations, and especially afraid of being "cringe." For those of you not up on the latest lingo cringe just means something acutely embarrassing. Hinge found that nearly 60% of the people in the study had not pursued a romantic

connection due to fear of rejection, and many believed that it had led them to miss out on an important opportunity or relationship. In essence, the one that got away was never pursued for fear of rejections or embarrassment.

If we're too afraid of rejection and embarrassment to ask a person who is literally on the same dating app as us out on a date, I don't think there's much chance of sharing the gospel, our testimony, or inviting that person to church.

But if we love our life, if we love our comfort, we will lose it. Today's comfort might be tomorrow's disappointment, when we look back at all the missed opportunities to share our faith and all the ones who got away. Imagine if we confront those fears, though, if we do not love life, or our comfort, quite so much and we speak boldly. We do great things for the gospel. Share our faith and testimony. Invite people into our churches. We might face some temporary discomfort, we might feel cringe, but someday we might stand and look out on a once barren field that has borne much fruit.

Where might God be wanting to plant you? What might you receive if you loosened your grip just a little?

Jesus, of course, did not love his life so much that he shrunk from the death that awaited him. He was willing to be cut down and planted so that the great harvest could begin. All of us are here today because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Countless lives have been changed. The blind have seen. The sick have been healed. Those enslaved to sin and addiction have been set free. Those adrift have found purpose. The grieving have been comforted. Anyone can count grains of wheat, but only God can count the stalks of wheat inside that grain. Every answered call, every shared testimony, certainly every martyr down, and even every

invitation to church is a ripple which serves to expand the kingdom of God. Sometimes we see some of the results, but a lot of times we don't. Sometimes all we see is the dirt we're planted in.

Have that conversation, share your testimony, invite someone to church. You never know where it might lead.

I'd like to end today with a story of someone who planted, and the wheat that was borne from it.

I want to tell you the story of a woman named Elizabeth. In the early 1700s, Elizabeth was married to a sailor. She had a son, John, by her husband, who was often away at sea. She took great care of her son, teaching him about the Bible and singing hymns to him. John would later say he was most happy in his mother's company, but sadly she passed away from tuberculosis when John was still a small child. He was sent to live with his father on a ship and learned all the vices the sailors could teach. His behavior was so poor it often landed him in trouble. His punishments were so severe that they could've, at times, cost him his life, and he contemplated suicide. At one point, John was, due to his poor behavior and inability to get along with a crew, enslaved. He was rescued, only to sail through a terrible storm, and the forgotten faith of his mother came to his mind again. He called out to Christ and became a Christian.

His sinful ways did continue for a while, including serving on several slave ships. Eventually he became convicted of his great sins and left the trade to become a preacher. John Newton would write the beloved hymn, amazing grace, how sweet the sound, to save a wretch like me, and he credited his conversion to his mother.

Still, the story doesn't end there because John would come to influence another man, William Wilberforce, who would become a leading

abolitionist and is credited with the eventual end of the British slave trade. And all this, because a woman named Elizabeth bloomed where God planted her, singing hymns to her son. All this because John Newton was unashamed of the gospel which had saved a sinner like him. And how many more might trace their salvation, or at least part of it, to amazing grace, or the words or examples of these people? And it all started with a tiny seed planted long ago.

Friends, it can be hard to get planted in the dirt. It can be messy, scary, uncomfortable, lonely, or cold, but only when we are planted, can we grow into something more.

Rev. Kate Mauch

March 17, 2024