

Sermon Preached by The Rev Timothy J. Patterson
John 12: 20-33
March 29, 2009

It was the time of Passover, the central celebration of the Jewish religious calendar. And among the many pilgrims who flocked into Jerusalem for the Passover festival there were some Greek Gentiles who had somehow heard about Jesus and his miraculous deeds. Apparently, the word was out on the street. And so these Greek Gentiles approach one of Jesus' disciples, Philip, who in turn enlists another disciple, Andrew, and the Greeks say, "we wish to see Jesus." But when Philip and Andrew come and tell Jesus, he reacts in a very unusual, unexpected way. I mean, they've simply come to him with a message - a request that some Greeks wish to see him, but Jesus seems to take it as this tremendously important sign. He reacts with a deep agony of spirit, and declares that his "hour" has now come. What is going on here?

Well, you may remember an earlier story in John's Gospel about the feeding of the 5000. Traditionally, in the Episcopal lectionary, that story -the feeding of the 5000, is read the week before this week's lesson because the two stories are connected. The same two disciples, Philip and Andrew, were involved with Jesus in that earlier story as well. Remember, it was Philip and Andrew who passed out those five loaves of bread that ended up miraculously feeding 5000 people, with an abundance of bread left over. That incident also happened at the time of Passover. And Jesus had spoken mysteriously about himself as the Bread of Life - remember? He said, I am the Bread of Life; and those who come to me shall never hunger.

Well, now it is Passover again, this time in Jerusalem. The Gospel is quickly moving toward its climax. But (as Stephen Verney puts it) now it is not just a crowd of country-folk from Galilee who are hungry for bread, but the whole Jewish race gathered from all over the world. And suddenly it is even Greek Gentiles who are coming and looking to Jesus to satisfy what is a universal human hunger - the hunger of the human soul for God. And even beyond the Jews and the Greeks gathered there in Jerusalem, beyond them again, it is the whole human race through generations still unborn. For Jesus knows that it is indeed a universal human hunger. So, suddenly it is not just 5000 people needing to be fed, but five billion, and indeed countless more billion of souls until the end of time. Jesus knows that this is the scale of what he is facing if he truly is to be the Bread of Life for all of humanity.

And so, when Philip and Andrew tell Jesus that the Greeks have asked to see him, he takes it as a decisive sign and says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Remember that throughout John's gospel Jesus has said, over and over, "my hour has not yet come." At that wedding in Cana when the wine ran out, he had said, "My hour has not yet come." Later, he promised rivers of living water to all who were thirsty, but not yet, for as John commented, his hour had not yet come. "Jesus was not yet glorified."

But now, he says, now the hour has come. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." But, as we know, it will turn out to be a very unusual kind of glory. In fact, it is the exact opposite of the kind of self-glorification humans usually seek. Most human beings are seeking the glorification of the ego in success or victory of some kind; but, for Jesus, it is the glory of the cross. The hour that has come, of course, is the hour of his death; but what Jesus knows - what Jesus knows is that it is through his death that the glory of God will shine forth in a way that the whole world may see.

You see, Jesus knew that to be available to believers everywhere required his dying - dying and then being lifted up from the earth to draw all people to himself. And he tries to help

his disciples understand with an example from nature. For, even nature demands the death of the seed if there is to be the new life of wheat.

“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.” The meaning is clear. Each individual grain has a hard, glossy husk within which its life is contained. Left intact, kept safe, however, that single kernel of grain produces nothing. If that grain does not fall into the ground, it will never bear the fruit it was intended to produce, and it remains forever a lifeless husk. But if it does fall into the ground, what happens? It’s husk softens and breaks open, and from inside the seed the power of its life begins to push outwards, and the true pattern of its life begins to emerge and unfold. Roots go down into the soil, and a shoot comes up into the light where it grows stronger and taller, growing enough finally to produce the harvest of grain it was intended from the beginning to give - eventually perhaps enough to make bread - bread enough to feed a family, bread perhaps enough to feed a multitude; but only if it first falls into the ground and dies. And so it is that Jesus is to give the grain of his life away, he has to let it fall into the ground and die, he has to give the single grain of his life away, if he is to be the Bread of Life for all of humanity, for all of us, for the whole world.

And in his example, Jesus not only reveals the pattern of his life, he reveals the pattern that is at the heart of all authentic Christian living. You see, we too are “seeds” of divine life, created by God for a particular purpose. As individual grains, we each have a hard, outer husk which protects us from the dangers of life in an often threatening world; but inside that outer casing, at the vulnerable core, is the gift - the divine essence of our life. Each of you is a seed of divine potential. Each and every one of you is a seed of divine potential. And God has planted you in this world in this present moment of history, in the particular circumstances in which you find yourself, to express this divine essence - to express your own particular gift - in a way that glorifies God. This is what your life is really about. As Richard Rohr likes to say, your life is not about you. Sorry. But your life is not about you. Rather you are about life - the larger Life of God seeking to be expressed in you and through you.

Elizabeth O’Connor writes about this process in a little essay entitled “The Hulled Heart.” She writes, “Early one morning, in a dream, I was addressed by a voice. It asked, ‘what are you doing?’ and I answered, ‘I am hulling my heart.’ The voice asked ‘Why?’ And I answered, ‘Because I believe God has need of a hulled heart.’ And when she awoke from the dream, she pondered that image, that metaphor, the hulled heart. She says, “I thought first of pulling green leaves off strawberries so that the fruit may be eaten. But hulling means more than that. We have to strip corn and grain of the hard outer husks in order to reach the fruit that is hidden within.” And then she asks the questions that I hope we will all ponder. “What are the hard, protective casings around my own heart that must be stripped away to reach the hidden grain? What are the outer wrappings that keep the essence of my life from becoming bread for the world?”

We’re just about to complete another term of our Servant Leadership School. We’ve had over 200 students in our various classes, wrestling with precisely these kinds of questions, engaged in that process of transformation for which Jesus was the model and to which Jesus calls all who would follow him. I want to be clear, this path and practice of servant leadership is not about trying to get people to do good works. It’s not about grimly trying to get people to do their Christian duty. It’s really much more about calling forth the gift that is the essence of the person himself - calling forth the gift that is the essence of the person herself. We do that by encouraging, simultaneously, a journey inward and a journey outward. Deepening the life of

prayer, deepening our connection with God, working through our various fears and anxieties, insecurities and addictions, and truly coming to trust God with our lives - that's the inward journey of faith. And then discerning our own personal call, some outward way of expressing our divine essence, God's particular calling for us, in this moment, in this season of our life - that's the outward journey of service. This, of course, as you will notice printed on the front of your bulletin each Sunday, is the "mission" of our church. "To know Christ and make him known through an inward journey of faith and an outward journey of service, giving thanks to God in all things." But we find that making those simultaneous journeys, inward and outward, really does require something like a process of dying and being reborn, letting that fearful, self-protective, ego-centered little grain of life to which we cling so tenaciously - what Thomas Merton called the "false self" - letting that little grain fall into the ground, so that the essence, the gift, the divine life within us can break through those hard outer husks and be expressed, revealed and given to the world.

What are the hard, protective casings around your heart that need to be stripped away to reach that hidden grain? What are the outer wrappings that keep the essence of your life from becoming bread for others, life-giving bread for the world?

We all need to be working with these questions as individual followers of Christ. And we also need to be working with these questions as a community, as a church. What are the outer husks, the hard, protective casings that keep the essence of our life as a church from becoming bread for our community and bread for the world, as Jesus calls us to be?

You know, next year, 2010, will mark the one hundredth anniversary of the establishment of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. It was in 1910 that the two tiny existing congregations in Greensboro merged to form Holy Trinity. And, in the witness of these nearly 100 years of faith and ministry, we have so much to be thankful for. For this beautiful church and the multitude of ministries to which this church has given birth. Just on this block, our Day School, our Music School, our Servant Leadership School, our Labyrinth ministry, our transitional housing ministry to refugees. And then outward into the city, our leadership in the Barnabas Network, in feeding the hungry and so many other ministries to the poor in our community, our widely recognized leadership in AIDS ministry and environmental ministry. And beyond our city, our ongoing missions from places like the mountains of Glory Ridge to the ghettos of Haiti. I like to think that if those Greeks came along and said, "We wish to see Jesus," we could respond: "Well, just take a look. He is alive and at work right here in our midst."

And yet I am also aware that we will mark this anniversary in a time of momentous change, indeed in the midst of global crisis - a crisis that is economic, environmental, moral and spiritual. For, as Bennett Sims said, and I agree we are now living on a "hinge of history," a turning point in the evolution of human consciousness the scale of which we have perhaps not seen for many centuries. Indeed, it is a time when now, more than ever, God, our community and our world will need the Church to truly be the church, to truly be the Body of Christ, the transformative and redemptive Presence of Christ himself alive and at work in the world.

And so, in words drawn from our gospel lesson, this is the call I am hearing: the hour has come for Holy Trinity Church to be glorified. The time has come for Holy Trinity Church to be glorified. Not glorified in success or achievement measured in worldly terms. But rather, glorified in the self-offering of all of our members, each of these individual grains of wheat. Glorified not by holding on to who we are and what we have, but rather glorified in self-giving, giving the essence of our lives away in love and service to others and to the glory of God. Individually becoming servant leaders, and corporately our church truly becoming a servant

leader for our city. Look at the resources we have in this church, the incredibly gifted people who belong to this community of faith. Imagine what this church would look like with every single member of this gifted community offering the divine essence of his or her life in some form life-giving service to the glory of God. Just imagine the abundant harvest our church would become if the inner potential of each and every grain of wheat were to fall into the ground and be freed from their outer husks to become bread - bread for our families, bread for one another in this community, bread for our city, bread for the world.

I believe that this is precisely what God is calling us to be and to do at this moment of our history as we seek to fulfill our mission. And, in fact, it turns out that this is what human life is really all about. This is the purpose for which God brought us into this world. The goal is not to hold on tightly and fearfully to this narrow little grain of our life. Rather, the goal is to germinate the new and abundant life of God through the offering of our life in self-giving love. In fact, as Jesus points out, whoever fearfully tries to hold on to the self-protective outer husks of their life, trying to preserve their life, will end up losing what they seek to protect. But those who surrender their life in faith, letting that individual grain fall into the rich, fertile ground of Christ and die with him, those will bear much fruit, indeed the fruit of eternal life.

So what is your part in this? What is the gift that is the essence of your life? What fruit, what harvest, is the single grain of your life intended to bear? Where is God calling you to give of yourself and thus become bread for others? And where is God calling us, this church, the Body of Christ in and for our community and our world? The hour has come, for you and for me.