

## **Dying to Live**

**Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...**

A few years ago I was teaching confirmation class (and after the class was over one of my students asked a great question)... she asked, "*Pastor, how do I know if I really have faith in Jesus?... how do I know if I really believe?*"...

And before I begin my sermon this morning – I want you to ask yourself a question - How would you have responded?... and how do you answer that question for yourself today?...

Our reading this morning from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel is probably one of the more difficult passages in the Bible to understand (and not only because Jesus uses spiritual metaphors to make his point - but because the teaching itself is very difficult to practice) ... and yet, I think it answers the question that the little girl was asking... in what it means to truly believe...

It begins by telling us that it was in Jerusalem (during the Passover festival) that a group of Greeks (or what was known as 'God-Fearing' Gentiles who were Judaic sympathizers who practiced some of the rites and traditions of the Jewish faith but didn't fully convert or adhere to the 613 commandments – mainly because of the restrictions on food, and of course, circumcision but who wanted to worship the One True God) and it tells us that they come looking for Jesus...

Why they wanted to meet with him we're not quite sure – but more than likely it was because Jesus had gained quite a reputation at this point in his ministry...

In fact, Jesus had turned water into wine – he cleansed the temple – healed the son of a royal official – healed a paralytic – fed 5000 people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish – he walked on water – gave sight to the blind – and raised Lazarus from the dead...

And my guess is that they wanted to see more of the miracles (and perhaps receive a few for themselves) from this Hebrew Holy Man...

But instead, Jesus shares with them a teaching (that even until this day has puzzled and challenged both seekers and followers alike)... he begins by telling them that the "*hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*" (meaning that he's about to be crucified – and give up his life for the sake of the world)...

And then using a spiritual metaphor Jesus says, “*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... 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 will be also*”...

I don't know about you but I would imagine that left some confused (just as it's difficult for us to hear even today)... and I say that because what Jesus was telling them (and is telling us) is that if we do everything in our power to protect our lives the way they are – by avoiding change, preventing conflict, constantly shielding ourselves from any discomfort in this world (and believing that the sole purpose of life is to satisfy our own needs and desires above the needs of others) – then at the end of this life we will find *that there's really no life at all...* (and the true value of your faith might even be questioned)...

But if we *hate our lives in this world* (which I can only assume meant hating the masks we wear that give us a false sense of superiority – and the emptiness of amassing more stuff (that most of us don't even need) – or the ways that we can become so callous to the suffering of others)... but rather, if we love the things of God more – that, then we will find life (*but find it* – as Jesus once promised – *more abundantly*)...

To put it another way – what Jesus was teaching the Greeks (and is telling us today) is that the grain of wheat that has to die is what some call the ‘false self’... it's the side of ourselves that takes our focus off of being a Child of God – your skin color, your ethnicity, your titles, how much money you make, what car you drive, the clothes you wear – because as we all know from attending funerals (that all of those things are going to die with us *when we die*)... and if that's all you have at the end of your life – what Jesus is telling us - is that you will have nothing!... that's how you lose your life... because all of those things will disappear...

That was also the distinction that Jesus made with his own life (and for the life of his followers)... that if the focus is on self-preservation – and self-protection – and only worrying about our own needs - then Jesus could have lived for himself... and in that way he wouldn't have had trouble walking around in the open... he could have toned down his message (so as not to upset anyone)... he could have saved himself the trouble of eating with the outcasts and the sinners... and instead, he could have rubbed shoulders with the powerful for self-advancement... and most

importantly, he could have avoided the cross – (if he loved his life in this world, that is)....

But instead, Jesus lived a life that inevitably brought about suffering... in that, he confronted evil, he spoke up where he saw injustice and protected the weak who could not defend themselves... he challenged the corrupt powers of his day... he preached a message of non-violence, forgiveness, and self-giving love – and most importantly, he believed that they were the most powerful things in the universe (and the only way to overcome evil)....

And so like us – he had a choice (die to himself the way a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies before it can bring forth a harvest) – or hide himself away from the world... like a grain of wheat that never gets planted (and ends up being good for nothing)...

In fact, listen to what preacher and author William Willimon once said... he said, *“If Jesus had saved his life, gone on a speaking tour, and written some books, there is no telling how long his movement might have lasted—a hundred years, maybe, or at least until the books fell apart... But because he was willing to lose his life—because his message mattered so much to him that he was willing to **show people what it meant** instead of just telling them about it—his seed bore a harvest, more than it ever did while he was alive.”*...

And where is the evidence of that harvest today?... it’s found in every believer who follows the same path of letting **the grain of their own life** be used for the sake of the world... and yes, it’s a difficult path... but it’s the path that those who say they believe in Jesus Christ – will follow... the ones willing to carry their cross...

Jesus says, *“Whoever serves me will follow me, and where I am, there my servant will be also”*...

So, let me close with a story about a man who is said to have died for about 20 minutes... and when he re-awakened people from all over took an interest in the man and wanted to know what he saw...

And one of the first people to visit the man was a Presbyterian minister – who asked the man, *“Sir, let me ask you a question – when you died and went to heaven was it full of Presbyterians?”*...

The man thought about it for a moment and said, *“To be honest with you Reverend, I didn’t see any Presbyterians... I am sorry”*... with that the Presbyterian minister walked away sad...

Next in was a Roman Catholic priest (who was pretty sure of himself) and said, “*Well, certainly you saw plenty of Roman Catholics in Heaven, am I right?*” ...

The man said, “*Well Father, I hate to tell you this but I didn't see one Catholic in Heaven*” ... With that the priest stormed out....

Finally a Lutheran pastor popped his head in and says, “*But what about the Lutherans... with all of our talk about how much God loves us - you must have seen plenty of Lutherans*” ...

But again the man said, “*Pastor, I'm sorry – I didn't see any Lutherans in Heaven*” ...

And then someone finally spoke up and asked, “*Well then, who did you see in Heaven?*” ...

Finally the man thought about it and said, “*The only ones I saw - were Christians – millions and millions of Christians*” ...

What I like about that story is that it answers the question, “How do I know that I believe in Jesus?” ... well, I can tell you that it doesn't matter what church you go to – what label you give yourself – what group you say you belong to... but to believe in Jesus is to follow him to the cross (and to live your life the way he lived his own)... like a grain of wheat that falls in the earth and dies – so that it, too, can bear a harvest of blessing – not for yourself only – but for the sake of the world...

May your path be made known to you on this day... may your worship be made known through your actions... and may our Lord's name be glorified – through you...

In Jesus' name we pray...

**Amen!**