

John 12: 20-27

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida 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.

Trinity Presbyterian Church

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“The Gospel According to a Troubled Soul”

Take a moment and picture the face of someone with a troubled soul. Right away we might think of the woman we see pacing in the shadows of our downtown streets. She is yelling at her invisible roommates. Her face is angry, tired of warring with the voices. A troubled soul. Perhaps it is the face of a friend or family member who is at their wits end. We haven’t seen them smile in months as the weight of the dark time presses on their chests. Troubled. Maybe we see our own faces when we get a health scare, forcing us into the reality that our life has a finish line. We find ourselves thinking about all the things we’ve wanted to do but have left undone and the grief troubles our soul. Now picture Jesus’ face. His expression is heavy with mortality as his hour has come. “My soul is troubled,” he says as he hears death’s clock ticking.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus must die? It is a difficult question. Why must the beloved child of God suffer for our benefit? Other religions do not have such depressing stories. The Prophet Muhammad dies in his sixties while resting his head on one of his favorite wife’s laps. The Buddha was said to have died peacefully at the age of eighty from natural causes. Jesus, on the other hand, isn’t so lucky. Does God really require the blood offering of this poor Jew in his early thirties? Is God so angry with our human depravity that only a pure sacrifice will do? I must confess, such a depiction of God troubles my soul. And how exactly does the one-time exchange work anyways? Is there a list of all my sins past, present and future on a ledger that God is suddenly willing to shred once Jesus is nailed to the cross? I’ve never understood how Jesus’ punishment, which is a manifestation of our collective fear and systemic violence, equates to a satisfactory atonement for my personal sins. Who needs a god who is as thirsty for violence as we are? Not me. But since Jesus’ death is central to our faith, I think it is a question we have to wrestle with personally and as a church. Why does Jesus have to die? Why must Jesus suffer for our benefit?

Crack open John’s gospel, and Jesus gives us a new slant of looking at things. “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain,” he says. “But if the grain does die, it will bear

much fruit.” They are words about the redemptive possibilities of suffering, both his and ours. And I think his words are not any easier to hear today than they were back then. Probably because there are so many ways in which people suffer that isn’t redemptive: abuse, genocide, bullying, famine. But such meaningless suffering isn’t the kind of suffering the gospel is talking about. To be clear: suffering is never the gospel’s goal, but it could be a by-product of the gospel’s goal. What Jesus is telling us is that if we do everything in our power to protect our lives the way they are—preventing change, preventing conflict, preventing pain—at the end of the day we might discover that we really haven’t lived an authentic life at all. But if we hate—or reject—all the ways we cheapen our lives by chasing comfort, security and control then there will be a purpose to our lives that spreads abundantly beyond ourselves. Like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “If a person has not discovered something they are willing to die for, then they are not fit to live.” It is a jolting statement, but when we listen to Jesus he doesn’t leave a lot of gray area either. We can love a life which is confined to our own needs and not ever truly live, or we can let go of our life, trusting that our lives will somehow spread beyond ourselves.

Well, we know what path Jesus chooses. He goes through the grain mill so that more fruit can be born. Why? Because it is who God is. It is what love looks like. This is a God who loves and loves and loves again. A God who refuses to give up on us no matter how troubled we are. Just as the sun rises faithfully each morning to awaken the day and spread its light on the earth. Just as a seed of grain dies so there is more wheat in the world. Jesus does what Jesus does, which is to love us to the point of losing his life so more love can be found in the world. Of course, this isn’t a romanticized version of love. It is a costly love. It might cost us our own comfortable ideologies. It might cost us the life we have tried to build for ourselves from the ground up. It might even bring us to the front door of suffering, again not as the goal of the gospel, but as a by-product of the gospel’s goal—which is to spread love as boundlessly as God does.

Could you imagine if Jesus had chosen a more secure, comfortable path for himself? Jesus could have taken his ministry underground. Began teaching in the caves where his followers would speak a secret password to get in. He could’ve stopped doing ministry in the wide-open. But he didn’t. Jesus could have listened to his friends and chosen a more neutral position that toned down the edge of his message and avoided confrontation. But he didn’t. Jesus could have settled for a 9-5 gig with a family and a couple of dogs who he’d walk every night under the canopy of stars. He could have lived a decent, promising life. But he didn’t. Jesus could have chosen a path other than the cross, but if he did he says there wouldn’t be any fruit—we wouldn’t be here. *But we are.* It is who God is. It is what love is. It is who Jesus is. And dare I say, it is who we are, too.

One day when our soul troubling hour comes, each of us holds in our possession a grain of wheat in which we get to decide if we are going to keep it for ourselves, or let it go trusting it will bear fruit. It is the seed of love. And in that moment, you can sense all of heaven and earth holding its breath, just waiting to see what we will do.