

## What We Give Our Lives For

*John 12: 27-33*

Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. <sup>27</sup>“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. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” <sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” <sup>33</sup>He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

A lot can change in one year. As if someone hit the fast forward button, time is disappearing in the pandemic blackhole. And now with the vaccine, we have a renewed hope of our return to church, at some point. And on the joyful day, we are going to notice some changes among us: our children will have grown six inches taller and may not look like children anymore. Many of us will have longer hair on our heads and faces. Our older members will have aged. And we will be acutely aware the empty seats once occupied by those we love. What a joy it will be to be together again, but the truth is we will also feel the sorrow in our bodies.

Jesus finds himself at Passover once again. In John’s gospel there are three Passovers to mark the time. At the previous Passover—Passover #2—he was in his ministerial groove: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and catching religious leaders in their hypocrisies. But fast forward a year and we find him acutely aware that the tide has turned. His soul is troubled as his hour has come and he knows things are no longer the same. A lot can change in one year.

We have felt what Jesus feels. Death troubles us. The thought of it. Its erratic powerless process. Its traumatic residue. Its sharp-edged finality. And let’s be honest: our souls have been troubled a lot this year. Maybe it was watching the number of pandemic deaths ticking higher. Maybe it was images of George Floyd gasping for breath. Maybe it was the violence on the Capitol Building or this past week the racist and sexist violence at the spas in Atlanta. The meaningless and unnecessary deaths in our world troubles our souls. But then there is the more personal side: you know, the painful existential reminder that our lives, and the lives of those we love, are so fragile and there is a finish line.

I once got called into the hospital to sit with the spouse of a young man who worked on painting airplanes. He fell off a 40ft ladder. By the time he arrived at the hospital, he was not able to breathe on his own. And as I sat with his young soon-to-be widow, I noticed she was holding on to his driver's license, rubbing his picture affectionately with her thumb. Rubbing it as if a magic genie would pop out and grant her one and only wish. As we sat, she kept pleading for his life. Telling me they didn't go to church, but they were good people who gave to charities. And if only God could spare his life, she would promise to offer so much more. In the bargaining moment, she kept clinging to the driver's license repeating, "I can't let go." I didn't sleep that night. I highly doubt she slept for a long time. We know the sorrow Jesus is feeling as his hour approaches. Death troubles our souls.

But then Jesus looks to a grain of wheat he is holding in his hand. I imagine he is rubbing it affectionally with his thumb: "unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." This is some strange fruit, isn't it? I mean, what fruit can blossom from such violence? And, for the record, how is his death called the glorifying moment of God for which the savior of the world came for? I have to admit, to think of his death as God's glorifying moment troubles my soul.

Except, the gospel insists that God's specialty is bringing forth life out of death. And sometimes we have to wait a great while for it to happen. But, you see, it isn't Jesus' death which is the glory of God. It is the extent of his love. For God, it's not a question of if the world is worth it? Or if we are worth it? I don't need Jesus to die for my sake. What I do need is Jesus to love and to love and to love us over and over again. Among us. Alongside us. Despite us. Love is what God gives God's life for.

And is it not love which continues to draw us into God's presence?

Is it not love which binds us together through thick and thin?

Is it not love that breaks us open to compassion, mercy, and forgiveness?

If a grain of wheat does not die it will only remain a seed in a shell. It has to be broken open if it is to share the element of life. And the metaphor is quite possibly Jesus' best. Because the same is true of love.

In our grief group, which concluded this week, everyone said what they were most grateful for was a safe space to be with those who understood what they were going through. A reminder that they weren't alone. And in the grief which breaks us open, there was also a love present that bound us together as friends who were surviving a shared story.

Jesus enters our story, so we can enter his. And when we experience God's broken open love for ourselves, it becomes what we give our lives for as well.

So I want us to imagine, that in our hands is a grain of wheat. We get to decide what will become of it. Will it remain a seed in a shell? Or will it be broken open, so it can bear compassion, mercy, and forgiveness? We get to decide. And all of heaven and earth will be holding its breath, waiting to see what we will do. Amen.