

Fifth Sunday of Lent: March 21, 2021

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Gospel Reflection

In one form or another, I have lived with this “grain of wheat gospel” for over sixty years. John 12:23-27 was one of several influences that shaped my early image of God and my original motivation toward religious vocation. “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies.... Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” The God I knew then demanded sacrifice as proof of love – almost to the point where the more it hurt, the more I would please God. And so, the grain of wheat was about dying to self, what they called “self-abnegation,” suppression of who I was, as if the self were always, well, selfish. Focusing on the *giving up* of oneself rather than the *giving of* oneself in love.

It took thirteen years, including months of counseling with a gifted Sister of Mercy, to untangle my interpretation of this gospel and my vocation as requiring that I sacrifice everything to be pleasing to God. I discovered that God might just be thrilled if I stopped trying to stage-manage my own holiness and worked instead on growing into the Marianne that God already loved. Instead of imposing sacrifice on myself, perhaps I might allow God to call me to self-giving from the inside out. And thus I began my quest to learn all over again what the grain of wheat gospel *really* meant for me.

Forty years later, the outer shell of my grain of wheat has burst again and again in creating new life with Al and the kids, in being wife, mom, daughter, sister, friend, teacher. Seeker of social justice. Seeker of God. Some days, it is hard to take the risk. Sometimes I struggle to reconcile the call to be grain of wheat with the need for balance and self-care. Some days I just want to hug my outer shell. Often, I do. *No, I don't want to be stretched or cracked open in this new way.* And yet there are those blessed times when the God-given impulse to love is stronger than the awareness of the cost.

I thank Janice Bonner for gifting me with a powerful visual experience of the grain of wheat gospel. In 1997, Janice advised our seventh-grade Megan in a science project which involved growing beans.

Because Meg planted her beans in clear plastic cups, and because several of the planted beans were dropped close to the side of the container, we were able to

watch the metamorphosis of the single bean into a new plant. For days, a single bean, buried. Stillness. Nothing. Then one day a crack, a split in the outer shell. Then an opening through which a determined sprout forced itself and unfurled, growing taller and stronger until it finally thrust itself upward through the warm, damp soil and awakened into the light. Leaves. And ultimately, more beans.

It made all the difference that we were able, thanks to that privileged side view, to witness this act of dying and rising. So often we plant a seed, give it water and warmth, and just wait til the sprout emerges, with no concept of the life force bursting from the seed despite its protective armor. Watching those beans, I learned once again that I did not, as I had once believed, have to rip my own shell open in some sort of self-immolation. Rather, I am simply called to allow the creative life force of God's love to open me from the inside out and to make far more from my opening-up than I could ever have accomplished with my shell still intact.

Simply? Facing this prospect, even the usually serene Jesus of John's gospel admits, "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'?" And then he concludes, "But it was for this very reason that I came to this hour."

Within the week after Jesus spoke the grain of wheat parable, he spoke these words of self-giving: "This is my Body, which will be given up for you. This is... my Blood... which will be poured out for you.... Do this in memory of me."

Given up for you. Poured out for you. Do this.

Jesus embodies the grain of wheat paradox. Not sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice, tallying one's losses to score points with God. But a life attuned to God's relentless impulse to pour out compassion, love, and mercy (thank you, Fr. Ray!) upon fragile humans and a wounded earth. A life spent *allowing* God's indwelling love to crack open the human constricting shell to bring life to others. Faithful to the point where the love matters more than the sacrifice. Faithful unto death to the deathless force of God's life-giving love.

Do this.

Mind blown.

Marianne Reichelt