

# “Dying and Rising: Through Death to Life”

Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-30

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The Reverend Kim Wadlington

Market Square Presbyterian Church  
Harrisburg, PA

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I'm starting today with a question for the choir! Choir, what would you do if after all your preparation for our Palm Sunday concert, just at the point where it's all good and come together, Tyler said, "we're not singing this after all." Yes, sad, mad, heartbroken, confused! Any of you who have been a part of a concert or theater production or even felt the satisfaction of completing a major project for work know the excitement that comes when you get to that point. And you have an inkling of how it might feel if someone said, "nope, we're going to bury that."

I imagine that's exactly how Phillip and Andrew felt in this story. It's the Passover, a major Jewish holiday, there is a ton of activity in the city and it's Jesus' message that's drawing a crowd. Then the unexpected happens, Greeks aka Gentiles, wish to meet Jesus. "The time has come" they think, "time to hit the national stage! The message Jesus is preaching will really spread now." And the gospel writer also sets us up to think that. Andrew and Phillip were two of Jesus' first 3 disciples. They've been telling people, "We have found the Messiah" and "Come and see" since the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This moment is the fruit of their work too. But Jesus has other ideas. He knows that this moment is the beginning of the end of his public ministry and the beginning of the end of his earthly life and the beginning of something bigger than any of them could ever have imagined. The arrival of the Greeks confirms what the Pharisees have been saying that the world is going after Jesus and Jesus knows that it's his time to lay down his life because it's only the whole picture that leads to the redemption of the world. The whole picture of Jesus' incarnation and life and death and resurrection and ascension is necessary for our Triune God's plan to be fulfilled. "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."

Throughout Lent, Allison and I have been preaching about the baptismal invitation to die with Christ so that we can be raised to new life. We've been talking about the transformation we undergo in baptism and so far perhaps the things we've been inviting all of us to die to are things we're okay giving up. Dying to shame, greed, worldly pressures, and the emptiness of societal expectations is challenging, but in the end we see the wisdom and benefit of doing so. Rising to

dignity, trust, the capacity to be present, and the belief that we are enough just as we are, sound blissful. But in this final parable, Jesus is asking his disciples to die to a dream that seems like it should be perfectly in keeping with what they set out to do. But, there's more. Jesus tells his disciples that laying down our lives, even as he will lay his down, is a generative act that will bear more fruit than our striving by itself ever can and by which God will be glorified.

I wonder if it's easier for us to understand what it looks like to lay down our lives in hindsight. It's the kind of thing we know when we see, but unlike Jesus we mostly do not have the forethought to plan to lay down our lives. It happens to us. But if we can get better at identifying when it has happened, that further shapes us for being able to offer our lives of our own free will. So this week I spent some time listening for stories of people who laid down their lives and the fruit that was born of that act for the sake of renewed community.

The first came when my brother sent me a podcast from This American Life titled, *Heretics*. Carlton Pearson was an American Christian minister and founder of the Higher Dimensions Family Church in Tulsa OK. During the 1990s he preached to an average of 6,000 people per Sunday and was by all the world's standards successful, famous, wealthy, powerful. By his own admission he preached a typical evangelical message, believe in Christ or burn in hell – forever, no matter your circumstances in life or even whether or not you've ever heard of Jesus. But one evening he had a conversation with God that changed his entire life. He was praying about the awful conditions of people suffering and dying from the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. In prayer, he asked God, "how can you condemn these people to hell when they are already living in hell?" The answer he got back was, "I don't. You have completely misunderstood me and worse, you misrepresent me to the world." This went against everything that Pearson had been raised to believe, everything he had learned in his studies, everything he knew about God and the Bible, and yet he believed that God had spoken to him and he began to read the Bible with new eyes and eventually he developed what he calls the gospel of inclusion. No one's going to hell, there is no hell. Even as he was learning anew, and dying to his old way of believing, he started to preach this gospel, but it was not well received by his colleagues, his denomination, or his congregants. Members began leaving, the five pastors on his staff left together to start a church down the street, and in 2004 he was branded a heretic by the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops. Pearson says, "if I had known what it was going to cost me, I never would have opened my mouth, but God doesn't show you everything all at once for a reason."

He eventually moved what was left of his congregation, about 200 people who were willing to go on his journey with him, to a Unitarian Church. He says the church is a freer place, less mean spirited. He's learned to embrace people he previously thought were excluded from Heaven. He says, "If you stop telling gay people they are going to hell, they actually want to come to church." He recounts a service in which he preached at Fellowship International in San Francisco at the invitation of Bishop Yvette Flunder. It's a Pentecostal church where Flunder and most of the congregation are LGBT and after he preached the gospel of inclusion, they applauded him

and Flunder asked him to walk down the center aisle and let people hug him because she knew how bruised he'd been by his church and the people who'd branded him a heretic and people hugged him and held him and she brought a little vat of warm water and the whole congregation gathered around him and they washed his feet and he said that was one of the holiest moments of his life. There was a congregant who had danced that morning in worship, and Flunder told him later that when the young man first arrived at the church he was dying of AIDS, and that his own father was a Pentecostal preacher who wouldn't speak to him, had disowned him, but being a part of that church saved his life. And Pearson says that in that place there was just incredible love and now on the other side of the loss he went through, there's no way he'd go back to who he was or what he preached before. He laid down his life, without even knowing it at first and in so doing, his life bore the fruit of love and of a different kind of community, one that is held together by compassion and not fear.

In her commentary on this passage, Rev. Ginna Bairby says "this parable invites us to value what is communal over what is individual. We who are members of the Christ-believing community are encouraged to imitate our teacher and die to ourselves to participate in the new life of the kingdom. No one harvests a single grain of wheat; on its own, it's mostly useless. Yet harvested sheaves of wheat can create the very Bread of Life. God uses the power of our collective discipleship, the work of our community, to bear much fruit in the world." "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 story about Pearson started with an individual but it had implications for a community.

What he and his congregation laid down, a particular theology of exclusion, is not what Market Square needs to lay down. You've done that work but every community of faith needs to ask itself, "What about us needs to fall to earth and die to bear much fruit?" Often what needs to fall to earth and die are practices that aren't central to who you are as a community but which the community likes very much, is accustomed to, is comfortable with. Worship times that no longer suit the kind of world we live in, forms of education that no longer draw people in, ministry activity or committees that aren't bad by any means, but don't really align with the church's mission and are just limping along. No one get panicky, I'm not proposing any major changes in the next 10 weeks with you. But we've talked about the ways the world is changing and the long-term affect that's having on traditional church, and you will have new leadership, and you're working to draw in new people. You're thinking about ways to issue Andrew and Phillip's invitation to "come and see" what God is doing in and through Market Square and should those efforts bear fruit and new people do come, you'll need to be ready for what they bring with them – new ways of being, different ideas for worship maybe, different needs for learning, just new, new and different. And new and different means that you might need to die to some of what is comfortable for you about this place and that is hard. But you can practice it now. You are already doing it in some ways, moving from radio to livestream for instance, having Sunday

school for children in a different format that suits our families better. And it's okay to mourn when something you love about the church dies, it's necessary even for you to be able to embrace the fruit that will come because when human beings deny their grief it often turns to anger and we strike out, but mourning together will enable you to be gracious and tender with yourselves, with one another, and especially with whatever is being born here anew. That's the goal, right? But it's not easy.

There is so much about this community of faith that is in keeping with God's kin-dom, your embrace of a gospel of love and inclusion is vital in the world today. But to live into the future necessitates a willingness to allow God to bring new growth. "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." Amen.