

Sermon March 17 – John 12:20—33
“*The Secret is Out – Death Produces Life*”

One of the secrets to life is hidden in plain sight, and yet this secret can be troubling, so we often turn away from it. “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 (John 12:24). It is the pattern of loss and renewal that runs throughout our lives. I can’t imagine any of us have ever given much thought to this as the secret of life. Every choice we make in life requires sacrifices for ourselves and our lives to be made in order for the new life to require some cost. For example, what are the costs and losses you paid for an education or career? If you have experience as a parent, you know that sacrifices are made in order for the new life of your child to emerge and grow. The same pattern is in nature. You can see it in the changing of seasons, falling leaves and new blooms, and the setting and rising of the sun. The secret is out: “Death produces life.” It’s the natural pattern of loss and renewal, dying and rising, letting go and getting back, leaving and returning, and it sits at the core of our baptism and what we declare in the Eucharist. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

Our text for today follows the story of a crowd that had arrived in Jerusalem to see Jesus. This is the last Passover Jesus would attend. We should keep in mind that the crowds that followed Jesus became a concern for the rulers of the day. This crowd of Jews stood on the edge of the road with palm branches, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” The crowd was pumped with excitement as the Word had spread about raising Lazarus from the dead, and it was this crowd that raised the eyebrows of the Pharisees, who murmured to one another, saying, “Look, the whole world has gone after him!”

The end of chapter eleven marks an essential division in John’s Gospel. Within days, Jesus would go up to Jerusalem for the final time. There is a thick tension in the air on the verge of the Passover. As we read from this morning’s text, we see a group of Greeks who had come to the Feast. These Greeks were aroused in curiosity as they came to worship at the Passover festival. They, too, had heard about Jesus’ miracles. Disciples Philip and Andrew appear as friends of these Greeks who ask, “We would like to see Jesus.” They might have expected Jesus to say, I would be glad to see them, but John tells us of Christ’s reply that the climax of his mission had at last arrived, saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” The significance of the story for us lies in the fact that we will see Jesus when we correctly understand the surprise of his answer—the right time has come for the whole world to know. Men and women from every tribe and race would become members of his spiritual family. They would soon learn that “*The Secret is out.*” *Death produces life.*

Be with me as I pause to pray.

Heavenly Father and God of innumerable mercies, give us the grace to be daily buried in the love of Christ, like the seed that is buried in the earth, and thereby may we begin to live more abundantly. With this help, may we learn that a fruitful life spent in loving others can glorify your name throughout the world. Then may the earth know its Savior, who with you in the unity of the Spirit is loved and worshipped, world without end. Amen.

Pastor Skip Heitzig refreshes our memory of a strange Movie titled “*The Last Emperor*.” Here was a young child, Puyi (Poo-eye), at the age of three, who was anointed the Last Emperor of the Chinese Dynasty before surrendering the throne in 1912 to the Chinese Republican Army at the age of six. He was a prisoner and pawn with no power in his country, exploited for others. Yet, this young child lived a life of luxury with thousands of servants who would do whatever he wanted, that is, until his imprisonment. However, these servants pampered him, and he was this grumpy little brat in charge of a country. He turned cruel and violent. He took particular interest in humiliating his servants. No one could control him. On one occasion in the film, his brother came to him and said, “What happens when you do something wrong?” The little child King said, when I do misbehave, somebody else is punished. To prove his point, he took a beautiful jar and smashed the jar, breaking it on the floor. Then, one of his servants was taken and beaten because of it. Now, that is precisely the opposite of God’s way of doing things when his servants do something wrong. The King is punished. We call that atonement. We get life for his death. We get rewards for all of the cruelty and injustice that was done to him. We get the benefits, and that is what we mean when we tell others that Jesus died for our sins. If there was one thing good that came about from the movie, it was that a single human life could have infinite value, for there came a day when his hour had come to go public, facing all his wrongdoings and sins as a ruler, transforming into an ordinary man ready to repent so that something new could arise.

Throughout Christ’s three-year ministry, a dominant theme had been “My hour has not yet come.” But now, suddenly, everything changed. The turning point of Jesus’ ministry had come. The Greeks who desired to see Jesus possibly came from the same city as Philip and Andrew and perhaps been personally known to them. “Sir, we **wish** to see Jesus.” They were eager to learn more about him. No doubt they heard the recent news that he had raised Lazarus of Bethany from the dead. Their request sums up the right attitude of any disciple as it should be. Jesus’ response seems to ignore them, but in the larger picture, the scene provides the core of salvation they were looking for. Instead, Jesus wanted to teach that the way to **glory** is not through triumph and glory but through death to self and through service to God and man. Unless he died, there would be no fruit, no salvation. His example does not save us; we are only saved through faith in what he has done on the cross.

The apparent cry of the current world situation and many of today’s mainstream religions fail to honor Christ’s glory or the Father as the crucified Savior, instead only seeking to glorify the world’s standards in opposition to grounded biblical principles. I do not have to tell you that there is a tremendous attack against biblical standards today—a pursuit of cultural ideologies inconsistent with the Bible, nor do they repent of their ways. Therefore, we must continue to guard our hearts and minds and not be taken captive by false philosophies of a man-centered gospel; instead, we must continue to praise and worship the sovereign God. Loving life in this world means living for the same things people in the world live for, and loving life in this world is the sure way to lose it.

Spurgeon once wrote that “our pride wants to serve Christ by striking out in new paths. The proud person has a desire to preach new doctrine, to set up a new Church, to be an original thinker, to judge and consider, and to do anything but obey. But his is no service to Christ. True

service consists of faithfulness.” I ask, then, that if we see new doctrines apart from the authentic word of God, what then becomes the aim of glory? People of faith hear this. Those who intend not to follow Christ in the path of righteousness set by Christ face severe judgment, for we are witnesses to the world that has neglected the purpose of their lives for the sake of comfort and happiness. Our culture is saying, no, it is about me. Our society says to be true to yourself. I say, no, we are here to glorify God the Father and to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to deny ourselves and to make him renowned by proclaiming the gospel of truth. Take up his cross and follow him.

Hear Jesus repeat these words, “I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains as it is, will never increase, but if it dies, it bears much fruit,” Jesus tells us that the source of his glory would be his death. Obviously, Jesus speaks metaphorically of the hour of His glorification on the cross. The picture of the seed that falls into the ground and seems to die, yet springs to life, is a beautiful metaphor for physical death followed by burial in the ground, which in turn is followed by rising up to new life. This was Christ’s way to glory, and it must be our way to glory, too, for if we learn to die to self, we will live to the glory of God. If we are to glorify Christ on the earth, we must be willing to lose our reputation and comfort.

The death of Christ was the life of the world. Jesus seems to say, “Unless I die, whatever you in your private opinion might think, my purpose in coming into the world will not be accomplished.” And so, Jesus uses the image of the wheat to illustrate the great spiritual truth that there can be no glory without suffering, no fruitful life without death, and no victory without surrender. Of itself, a seed is weak and useless, but when it is planted, it dies and becomes fruitful. Jesus is talking about planting a seed, not burying a seed. The principle then: It is only by death that life comes.

In closing, I want to share this story from Our Daily Bread Ministries titled: “Nuts in the Attic.” A Christian who was born and raised in a log house visited his boyhood home after being away for 35 years. As he walked up to the now-deserted cabin, he remembered that, as a youngster, he had planted some walnuts along a stream that ran through the farm. When he went down to the creek, he discovered a beautiful row of stately walnut trees. Then he recalled that he had also hidden some nuts in the attic. He was curious to see what had happened to them, so he climbed into the dark attic and poked around in a corner until he found them. What a difference! Those he had stored were nothing but dry and dust-covered nuts, while the ones he had planted had become flourishing green trees! Immediately, the words of Jesus came to his mind with new meaning: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” ([Jn. 12:24](#)).

What is your life that you need to let go of it today? What might you leave behind? What needs to die so that something new can rise? The Lord had His own death in mind when He spoke those words about the grain of wheat that must die to produce much grain. But they apply to believers as well. If we refuse to “die” to our own selfish desires, or to a human centered gospel, we “remain alone.” In Christ’s death on the cross for man’s sin and the Christian’s death for his own sin, the same principle applies: In dying, there is living! I can hear that same call before Jesus’ last Passover: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Me too. That’s the Jesus I want to see. Don’t you? Amen