

## **We Want to See Jesus**

John 12:20-36 by Patty Friesen (March 21/21)

On this first day of spring, we give thanks for the gifts of the earth, the rotation of the earth tilting to the sun, alternating warmth to the southern and northern hemispheres. We give thanks for seed catalogues and the hope that spring and seed planting brings. There is no more concrete image of Jesus that John the gospel writer could give us, than the image of grain and growth potential.

We have wheat on the altar that I stole from Bruce Boldt's field a couple of years ago. Someone said it was only worth 10 cents. I also found this jar of wheat in the Sunday school storage. It has probably sat before OMC children in Sunday school as an object lesson about Jesus for decades. As Anne Lamott says in her new book, if we want our children to fall in love with God, they've got to fall in love with nature. She says the most Jesusy thing we can do is spend time with children outside in nature like Jesus did with his disciples, pointing out the mysteries of grace through grain, water, birds and lilies of the field.

Today's gospel reading in John 12 describes the mysterious gift of a fruitful life through an object of nature - a grain of wheat. It begins with the arrival of the Gentile Greeks asking Philip politely, "Sir, we want to see Jesus." Why do they ask Philip? What does Philip represent? In John 1 Philip is the first disciple Jesus tells to follow him. Philip tells Nathanael to come and see Jesus. Philip is known as someone who helps others see Jesus. And as the Pharisees unwittingly predicted in verse 19, the whole world is chasing after him.

I read of a church that had the Greeks' words engraved in the back of the pulpit "We Want to See Jesus." It was a reminder to the preacher to stick to the point and not go off topic! The whole world is seeking Jesus - but will they be disappointed? The sought after Jesus leads into a confusing monologue about death that had to be a disappointment to Philip and Andrew and their Greek guests: Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it will not bear fruit. Only if a single grain, the individual one, dies, then it multiplies.

The significance of this parable of the seed buried in the ground is for understanding that Jesus' death lies in the contrast between remaining solitary "just a single grain" [NRSV]) and "bearing much fruit". In John, "fruit" is Jesus' metaphor for the life of the community of faith. Jesus thus uses the seed parable to show that the salvific power of his death resides in the community that is gathered as a result of it. Since Jesus' ultimate service is the gift of his life in love, calls the disciples to love as he loves and hence to serve as he serves. What it means to be Jesus' servant will be enacted in the humility of foot washing of chapter 13. The passion prediction also focuses on relationship to all people, that through Jesus death 'all people will be drawn to him. Finally, in the concluding teaching of vv. 35-36, the community that arises as a result of Jesus' gathering is described as "becoming children of light."

Throughout the Gospel, this new relationship to God and becoming children of light in community is described in the metaphors of new birth and new life. What is striking about John 12 is that the connection between Jesus' death and the life of the believing community is repeatedly stressed. The faith community consists of those who redefine the meaning of life on the basis of Jesus' life, death and resurrection (vv. 24-

26). The faith community is the fruit of Jesus' life, death and resurrection; it is what shows forth Jesus' love to the world.

At the heart of the John's understanding of the death of Jesus is the recognition that it is of a piece with the life of Jesus. Jesus' death is an expression of his relationship with God, which began "at the beginning." For the Fourth Gospel, then, a theology of reconciliation does not focus exclusively on the death of Jesus, but on the incarnation itself—the life, healings and teachings of Jesus—and on the interrelationship of God and Jesus in love that the incarnation reveals. It is critical to trust in Jesus so that one can share in the gift of his life—the gift that leads to new life, and to the confident assurance of God's and Jesus' abiding presence with us always. The decision to trust is the decision to become a partner in that relationship, and to become a member of a fruitful community that is bound to God and Jesus as they are bound to each other, and whose relationship to one another is an extension of the God/Jesus relationship. (New Interpreter's Commentary)

These are theological realities that are hard to describe in words and when the deacons met with the Faith Exploration class, even the deacons who are spiritual giants among us, struggled to find the words to describe the mysterious work of God in our lives. Some used physical objects to describe our faith. Sometimes we have to see a physical symbol, like a piece of grain in order to see Jesus. Wilf used a Canadian Foodgrains bag that he held up to the computer camera with the verse, Feed the hungry. That described his faith expressed in action - feeding the hungry. Wilf lives out this faith with his work with Canadian Foodgrains and with the Osler Community Garden, tilling the garden with the rich Floating Gardens compost. Also when he tills

the garden, he breaks up the vole nests who eat Community Garden potatoes. So basically, Wilf is killing voles for Jesus!

All of us are living out what we know of Jesus – whether we are biking to work, or coaching soccer, or serving on a board or volunteering at a Thrift Store or donating on-line to our favourite charity or teaching piano. We all have symbols of our faith we could share – sheet music, soccer balls, electric cars and price taggers. Our Christianity and Culture Sunday school class was just getting started on sharing our faith with objects before the pandemic hit and I'd like to pick up that theme when we can hopefully meet again in the fall. I'll never forget Alex sharing his faith symbol in his sermon March 15 last year before we closed. He brought a pack of cigarettes that reminded him of his grandfather who smoked and his family that shaped his faith. I don't remember specifics about the sermon but I'll never forget the pack of cigarettes in church! Our faith takes on some very interesting symbols sometimes from the ups and downs of our life and we must share them with our children and young people. Our children and young people want to see Jesus in us. Our actions will always speak louder than our words but sometimes we also need words and symbols.

Grain that is air-seeded in the earth in the upcoming weeks is done so with the confidence and trust that it will sprout into a new stalk with many heads in the gift of multiplication. On this first year anniversary of the pandemic, we all have been like grain planted, shot into the ground with air and there we sat in shock by ourselves in isolation and dark waiting and waiting. We received the moisture of the love of our friends, family on Zoom and telephone and the sun's warmth of God's love and vaccine

development and in due season, we are sprouting to new life and maybe even to a different life.

Individually, what new life has sprouted for us this year? I think I've learned more contentment, I told my spiritual director this week. I can't satisfy my restlessness with going out to movies and travelling like I did before.

What is sprouting for us as a congregation? Most of our 70 and 80 year olds have been vaccinated at least once by now. How thrilling – and at church we are slowly opening up for worship with more congregants with masks - pulling up the dividing ropes and putting more new hymnals in the pews. Of course, we could have more shut-downs also but we are getting the hang of this! We are more calm and flexible and organized than we were a year ago.

It is going to be an emotional couple of months as our joy is mixed with the sadness of what we lost. We will be excited and a bit scared at the same time. We ministers and deacons are talking about small group Zooms and outdoor gatherings and community re-building that will have to be done as we inch out of the pandemic.

Beyond ourselves, Community Connections is working hard at discerning what God is calling us to this next year with questions in the congregational review and we did a helpful needs assessment in Osler where we called different entities in town and found out that Osler has kids. 30% of our town is kids. And we have seniors. We trust God is germinating opportunities and growth for us individually and collectively. Let us trust in the One who plants us and watches over us waiting for a fruitful harvest. Let us pray...

Gardener God, you have planted and protected us by your faithful hand. Send us the grain of your grace from Christ, the Bread of Life and make us germinate and bear the fruit of love as a sign of your life in us. Let the sweet fragrance of shoots you have planted praise you forever. Amen. #1002 VT