

“A Grain of Wheat”

John 12:20-32

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Editor's note: The following sermon was preached at the closing worship service for a reunion of former Presbyterian missionaries to China and their children. The reunion was called at the request of Bishop K.H. Ting, president of the China Christian Council, who attended and made an opening address. Reconciliation between missionaries and the church in China was an important theme of the meeting.

I want to begin by saying along with all of you what has been said before but bears repeating many times in this experience, and that is a word of thank you. Thank you first of all to Bishop Ting, for if he had not been gracious enough to suggest doing this, we probably would not have been presumptuous enough to do it. Thanks also to President Oldenburg and to Professor Tommy Brown and to the people of Columbia Theological Seminary, for if you had not been energetic enough to organize it, we probably could never have brought all of our individual memories and photographs together with any coherence at all. We have been comparing memories and enjoying reknitting the family that has been separated over time and over distance. Some of this is just good old nostalgia, just the familiarity with things that we share uniquely with one another. But as someone has said, “What good is nostalgia if you’re losing your memory anyway?”

We have also been honoring the saints who have gone before us with some little pride, I suspect, some considerable laughter, and mutual humanity, and a great deal of gratitude. And we’ve been trying to cope with the normal, natural, basic behavioral schizophrenia which we’re all to some extent part of because we have grown up in two countries and two cultures.

I have had a basic hardship in this process and that is simply the fact that I have no memories of China. I was three years old when my mother died tragically and my father gathered his four sons and with the help of other missionaries, carried us back across the Pacific and across the continent until we settled in the Carolinas. He put us out in Montreat where we ran freely on the hills in part because of the security of the knowledge of family and kin, and missionary kin who would take care of us. I have never grown up a moment in my life, of my active memories, without knowing that I was part of a family that was much larger than any bloodline; part of a kinship pattern that was made out of faith and common service. And I have learned to love people whom I do not really know, in part because we together have been able to serve.

I know that I owe my life to God and to my mother who bore me and to my father who raised me, and also to this enormous network of extended family of missionary kin who surrounded me with the irrefutable evidences of community and of caring when I felt alone; and at the fact of family which is established far beyond particular ancestry. Arline and I had the privilege of visiting in China in 1983. We were guests of Peter and Eleanor Tsai. Taking us through China and introducing us along were Newt Thurber and Doris Caldwell. We do have memories. But our memories really are

the memories of those who have memories. And I celebrate that with you.

Our passage, John 12:20-32, is a turning point in the Gospel narrative. Some Greeks, God fearers, but of another race and culture, (some Gentiles) come seeking Jesus. They go to Philip, who from Bethsaida had some association with Greeks as well as Jews, and who by his Greek name they thought would be a little more approachable than anyone else. They said, "Sir, we want to see Jesus." Incidentally, that phrase is right here on a brass plaque on this pulpit as it is in many pulpits not only in this country but around the world. "Sir, we would see Jesus."

Philip, not certain what would happen on the basis of this request and wanting to be sure of himself, sought out Andrew, who throughout the scripture has a pattern of being a son of encouragement enabling people to find access to the Lord. The two of them come to tell Jesus "the Gentiles want to see you." Now, time and time again in the Fourth Gospel and in the synoptic Gospels as well, we have heard Jesus say, "my hour has not yet come." But now with this announcement of the interest of those from beyond, Jesus says, "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." He is obviously deeply moved by the event and the moment, and he announces the decisive hour and his impending death. John is very careful to associate clearly in our minds the death of Jesus and his offering of the gospel to all men and women around the world.

Raymond Brown, of Union Theological Seminary in New York, says that the coming of the Gentiles is so theologically important to the writer that the writer never tells us if the Greeks got to see Jesus. Indeed they disappear from the scene in much the same manner that Nicodemus slipped out of sight by night in chapter 3. The truth is that the real message precipitated by the coming of those from afar to see Jesus, the real message is "my hour has come." The need, the readiness, the openness of the world, prompts the urgency of the cross, and the cross and the world are intimately related in John's announcement of the death and the passion and the victory of Christ. In the mind of Christ, in the mind of John, in the mind of the church, there has always been this close relationship between the cross and world.

Jesus struggles with the recognition of this reality. A few verses later in this passage he says, "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say, Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name." There is no dramatic scene of Gethsemane, or of the Mount of Transfiguration in the Fourth Gospel. But these verses offer the Johannine equivalent to what we see as the agony in the garden, the struggle with the moment which has come. And a voice like thunder responds, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The Father affirms the Son's life and then turns to face the future moment, and the son turns his attention where the father gazes.

Jesus' face is now set to the cross and he teaches the disciples what that means. There are in these immediate passages three lessons on the paradox of the cross.

1. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it abides alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit" (v. 24). We have said that several times here together. We have been aware that that verse speaks to the moment, decades, and the century in history that we celebrate and observe. Says Jesus: it is in the nature of things, a little grain is nothing by itself, unless it is willing to die in the earth, and then it has the potential of bearing much fruit. The contrast is one of not dying and thus remaining unproductive. The grain either remains barren or it bears fruit. Those are its alternatives. Those are

our alternatives. So the message is one that only through death is the fruit born. And dying is in order to live; dying to self, dying to darkness, dying to this world, dying to human glory. Or to put it succinctly, *the cross is the means of life*. That is Jesus' message; the means of life and of fruitfulness. The fruit is to be understood as the people who are coming to Jesus and thus to God.

In chapter four, with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus points to the Samaritans' coming to him, and says, "Look, the fields are already white to harvest." It is that anticipated harvest of those people from beyond who would be the fruit that would come from the grain. The secret of fruitfulness in life is to let go, and to let God work the great miracle of life itself.

The mission of the church is established by this means. If we hold back and we only think of ourselves and our survival, then we bear no fruit, and the mission produces nothing. It simply abides alone in futility and in loneliness. Ignatius of Antioch, an early martyr, is said to have cried out at the moment of his death, "I am God's grain." That is the mission of the church. And that I think we should say was the mission of the church to China over the past century. Our ancestors understood the need to let the seed fall. It may have been blended with other threads of thought in terms of bringing the world to Christ in this generation. There could have been triumphalism mixed with it, but inevitably there was that seed of thought that there must be the risk to let go and let God. Let go and let's see what God can do.

That is the story of the heroes and the heroines—wise and not so wise—who have taught us the need to risk everything, and that is what we celebrate. During shifting changes, hardships, intimidation, internship, in season and out of season, the fruit was borne. That is also the key to the mission of the church of Christ in China. For it was always at risk itself. Not just the missionaries, but the church itself was always at risk. It was pushed to the wall and ultimately in the Cultural Revolution of 1969 to 1979 utterly disintegrated, dissipated, and to the extent to which human power can do it—destroyed.

During those years my dad used to say, regularly, "We must pray for the Christians in China." And I remember thinking in my own youthful pragmatic, western way, are there any Christians in China? We must pray for the Christians in China; they're there. I shall never forget that. And after 1979, when we did not know whether there were any Christians in China, and they did not know whether there were other Christians in China, suddenly we discovered that there were millions and millions of Christians in China. The church had blossomed again by the blood of the martyrs, and the seed having fallen to the ground, had died and born great fruit.

2. The second illustration of paradox that Jesus gives us is in the following verse: "One who loves his or her own life alone, loses it, and one who hates his or her own life in this world, will keep it for eternal life" (vs. 25). Lay it up as your prize possession and it's gone. You do not have it. By the very desire to hold on to it and to keep it and to survive, we do not have it. Only one who disregards his or her life—hates in the sense of throwing it away with generosity—will keep it for eternal life. Jesus is saying the cross is *the way of life*—it is the means of life and of our salvation but is also the way of life. It is the way in which the people of God live by faith. Christ did not pour out his life only at Calvary, he had given it away for God and for people every step along the way. That's really what the healing ministry is, that's really what the teaching ministry is, the finding of life by losing it. The disciples are called to understand that

and to live by that. You find your life by losing it, and if you simply seek to keep your life and to hold your life, then you've lost it. Those are the marching orders for the believer and for the church. The church that simply seeks to survive is in deep, deep trouble. The church that understands its task to serve and to sacrifice and to witness is on the pathway of life.

That has to do with the mission of the church. While we can look at the great dreams of winning the world in this generation in terms of historical perspective, the dreams are nonetheless on target in terms of setting before us a task that is greater than ourselves.

That was the story of the mission to China. What became the ultimate question quickly upon arrival? What can we do to help? What can we do to be of help to them? The lesson of the mission, not only in China, but clearly there, was that compassion became the point of contact. And the things that we have celebrated are the points at which we and our ancestors were able to touch the human needs of girls and young women, and older women, and men, and families; to touch the structure and minds and community and sick bodies. The mission sought not to save life, but to find it by losing it.

And that is the mission of the church in China today. That is the powerful message which Bishop Ting, Peter and Eleanor Tsai, and others have helped us to see. The church has come out of the Cultural Revolution with the knowledge that it must live for others. It does not live simply to survive. It lives to serve. I have noticed, as you have noticed, that they are peculiarly indifferent to the matter of statistics. They do not count names and noses nearly as carefully as we do in the United States. And they are remarkably indifferent to matters of structure and of polity. They're simply not ready to raise those questions. They've got some living and some serving to do. And the message of the church in China is the message of the church, of mission of the church throughout history, and not unrelated to the history we've been celebrating these three days, that the cross is the way of life.

3. There's a third paradox and it comes in the very next verse. "If any serve me, they must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servants be also. If any serve me, the Father will honor them" (vs. 26). Not just life for others, not even just life for others in order to experience life eternal, but because that is his way and we must follow him. It is not service for others for any sake other than his. The disciples' service is to follow him. So that *the cross*, to put it succinctly, *is the key to discipleship*. The cross is the means of life itself.

We cannot simply say, "Lord, Lord," but we must follow him and serve him. In doing that we believers find the mission of the church fulfilled, almost in spite of ourselves. And in that service God will honor us. I've struggled with that. How does God honor us? I think the experience of thinking with people from the church in China has helped me to come to this insight. The honor that God offers us is that God will graciously choose to use us, to take our poor gifts and our inadequate talents, and use them to produce a harvest of gratitude and honor not to us, but to God's holy name. That has to do with the mission of the church throughout the ages, for Christ is Lord of the church, Lord of the world, and Lord of our lives. Our task is not to point to ourselves, but to Him.

That tells the story of the mission to China over the past hundred and more years. It's a story of those who went in the strong name of Jesus, who when they had their wits

best about them and were most conscious of the gracious presence of the power of God, knew that the signal was not to call attention to themselves, because that was their weakness, but to call attention to Jesus, for that was their strength. I think that also tells us at least a glimmering of an insight into the story of the church in China now. "I am crucified with Christ," said Paul, and others can say this now in the experience of the church in China. "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."

Jesus' dynamic and dramatic conclusion and call to this passage, his passage about the cross and the world, the grain of wheat, and the means of life, the way of life, and the key of discipleship was his defining word, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men and women unto myself" (vs. 32). That is our task! In a way it is as simple as that. We've been celebrating here the fact that the lessons of over a century tell us it is not always simple, but it is always true. "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men and women unto myself."