

Pastor Gregg's Remarks:

The coming Sunday's gospel text offers us a fascinating lens through which to view life:

[Jesus said,] "Very truly, I tell you, 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)

Jesus' parable is not foreign to his audience. One could imagine, had he stopped there, several heads would be nodding around him (and we can agree with his point, too). In order for life to thrive, it is sometimes necessary that *other* life come to an end. Think of forest fires, or even pruning.

What becomes more difficult to accept is the teaching he continues just one verse later, where Jesus makes an important distinction - one that is almost imperceptible. He says those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in the world keep it in eternity. The heads have probably stopped nodding.

Crucially important to understanding this passage is the focus on *what* one is living *for*, and *whom*. The grain does not live without purpose, and purpose is found in the end of its life, too. Were the grain to live only for itself, life would not spread. The purpose found in life (and death) is that life should continue beyond a singular experience. What has been vibrant about each person's experience of life is from God and should carry forward. But what about self-serving, indulgent life? We do *not* need more of this. Living for ourselves is not why Christ made known (and real) the Kingdom of God.

So, what happens when we use this teaching as a lens through which to view our lives? What happens when, rather than categorizing a year of pandemic as a collection of successes and failures, we instead take a long look at the way we have lived this past year and ask, "*What needs to die in me, in order that something better can live?*"

I'll go first. My reports to Council have given a decent overview of where my efforts have been in the past year. What they have *not* reflected, though, was the hours attributed to these tasks. My balance of work and home has been out of whack since this pandemic began to change things last March. I felt like I had just gotten the balance where it ought to be, when the realities of ministry in this strange time necessitated more direct involvement (and thus, more time devoted to work). So, as I ask the question above, I have discerned my answer is my work/home imbalance. This imbalance makes me a less effective servant of God - worn out, my ability to send forth God's love and life is diminished.

My solution? Commit to doing better, and build in some accountability, too. For me, that accountability comes in a new furry, four-legged friend. We are only a couple of weeks into having our first dog, and already I am seeing how Mina is making me a better person and pastor. She has needs for living, growing, and being fulfilled. Seeing to *her* needs helps me see the importance of my own. And then, when returning to the more typical tasks of ministry, I find more joy in what I do, more clarity in what I offer.

Funny enough, having a dog in our house has also shown the wisdom of Jesus' parable. Something had to die in order for us to welcome this new life - every meal is different, so is working, and exercise, too. On the very first day we had her with us, I worried that I would not have enough time for myself. But the more time I spend with my dog, the more I discover the truth that time spent living for someone else is exponentially more fulfilling than I realized.

My prayer for you this Lent is that you would pause - perhaps connect spiritually using one of the methods we've been learning - and discern with God's help what in your life needs to come to an end, in order that a better, fuller life with Christ and the people of God can begin.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

Pastor Rachel's Remarks:

We have just crossed the one-year mark of the change in our congregation and country due to pandemic. It's a very strange milestone – a year ago, I could not have imagined COVID and all it entails going on this long. I could not have imagined the loss and struggle our community and country and world would endure. But I also could not have imagined the strength and progress that would come out of this time.

This past Sunday, the Youth and I spent more than an hour reflecting on this year (the coffee hour group also had a smaller-scale discussion on this topic). We remembered back to what we felt when this all started. We talked about how school has changed, and what that has meant for them. We discussed what we've missed and what we really don't miss from pre-COVID life. We made guesses about what pandemic-based things we'll keep doing once COVID is a managed disease. We shared what is helping us keep going as this managed stage isn't quite here. In this conversation, we found that we have a wide variety of feelings about this year milestone. Some of us see the light at the end of the tunnel; some of us aren't sure how much longer we can take this way of life; some of us have a lot of hope in the vaccine ending this issue; some of us feel like the underbelly of society has been shown in this crisis; most of us feel all of these things some of the time. And we were all glad to have some time and space to talk honestly about how it's been going and how we are doing.

Afterward, I reflected more on how we've come through the last 12 months. Grace has managed this year with... grace, I would say. It has not been an easy time. There have been difficult decisions and sacrifices made in order to preserve the health and lives of our siblings in Christ. We have missed a lot of things. And yet, we have continued to do God's work in our congregation and community. We have continued to connect with and care for others. Our leaders have stepped up and helped out. We have gotten creative about how to do ministry. It has been an awful year in some ways, and an astounding year in other ways.

And though we are not yet into the new normal that is life with COVID managed, we are continuing to move forward together. Our committees are still finding new ways to do their ministry. We are just starting our new partnership program with local aid organizations. We are making small steps towards longer-term planning. I don't know our new normal will arrive, or what exactly it will look like, but I am confident that Grace will be doing God's work as we get there.

I encourage you, if you haven't already, to take some time to reflect on this last year. Ask yourself the questions the Youth asked. Consider how you have grown and changed. Look for the ways that God has been present – and continues to be present – in the midst of it all. And join me in giving thanks for what we have been able to do, and what is still to come.

Peace in Christ – Pr. Rachel