



## **Lent 5: March 18, 2018: Holy Cross Japanese Canadian Anglican Church**

### **John 12:20-33**

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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When I was in college I had an excellent bicycle. It was a ten-speed with racing handlebars, a delicate frame, and tires so thin, you could barely believe they would hold you up or support you as you moved forward. Unbelievably light and fast, it was metallic gold—the gold of queens and kings, the gold of military medals and Byzantine art, the gold of all that is rich and heavenly.

To ride this golden bike, so fast and so beautiful, was to have all speed, all beauty, all youth. But one day as I was riding down a hill on my campus I hit a patch of something rough or slippery (I don't remember exactly). I only know that all at once, I was tumbling forward, sprung off my bicycle seat, pitched over the handle bars, flying over the delicate metallic gold frame and falling, falling, down onto the side of the street onto the indignity of gravel and dirt.

And while I was falling in one of those rare, slow-motion moments I remember thinking to myself: "You are falling. Remember what this feels like. You will experience this again."

I was right, of course. I would experience many more falls—some of them of my own making, some of them not. And the question for me each time I fell would be: what will I do with this experience of falling? Or perhaps what would I allow the experience of falling to do to me?

In John's Gospel for today, Jesus is on the cusp of what will be his great fall—his crucifixion and death. He and his companions are already in Jerusalem with all the teeming crowds who would be in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Some Greeks who've heard about Jesus but who have never met him, tell Philip that they want to see Jesus. Philip and Andrew tell Jesus about this, but instead of giving them a direct response to their request, he says these words: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified 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."...."Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

These densely packed words give us a view of John's Jesus. Jesus in the Gospel of John is God's holy grain of wheat that falls to earth in his crucifixion and dies, and through this

falling and his being raised from the dead, enables the Christian community to come into being as the fruit of his falling. Jesus is the one who in his falling is glorified for us all and leads us to our own glory.

But, for me, Jesus' words also say something about living the Christian life, especially in the midst of the many falls you and I take in our lives. This is true whether those falls come as public tumbles along our speedy paths or whether they come to us as more quietly, more privately, along the quiet footpath that is often our lives. Yes, this image of the grain of wheat falling into the ground and becoming more than it was all by itself before the falling tells us something even about the falls we take on account of acts of grave injustice that have been done to us.

And so what does this image have to offer us?

First, I want to speak to what I believe this image and this passage is not saying to us. Jesus words about the grain of wheat falling and becoming more are not saying that the experience of falling—whether the fall comes about randomly or comes about through acts of gross injustice—is supposed to be easy, pleasant or even acceptable. Jesus is not telling us, for instance, that we are to simply accept and forget what happened during World War II when Japanese American and Japanese Canadian people were interned. Jesus is also not telling us that we should simply accept and forget when our lives fall apart when a loved one dies, when we lose a job or when we lose something or someone precious to us. To speak more to the situation here at Holy Cross, Jesus words are, finally, not telling us that we should just quickly move on and through the fact that the parish has had to make the decision to go from full-time to part-time clergy.

But if Jesus' words are not about these things, what are they about? How are we as Christian people to respond to the many experiences of falling that our lives contain?

Yesterday some of the clergy of the diocese had a conversation with an Anglican monk who spoke to us about what spiritual direction is all about (spiritual direction being one-on-one conversations with someone wise that are meant to be helpful in terms of deepening our spiritual lives). As this Anglican monk was describing spiritual direction, he said this:

Spiritual direction is concerned with exploring and answering this question: What is the invitation from God in what has happened or what is happening in our lives? What is the invitation from God in every experience, whether joyful or painful?

This, I believe, is what our Gospel is saying to us today. In every experience of falling, whether we are falling out of good health, whether we are falling out of relationship with those we want to be in relationship to, whether we are dealing with the fall of others' lives or our own lives on account of gross injustice. The question is the same: what is God's invitation to us? What is God's invitation to new relationships? What is God's invitation to truth and reconciliation? What is God's invitation to action and new life? In our exploration and our response to this and these questions that much fruit will come and that the single grain of wheat that has fallen to the ground will find itself becoming the vehicle for an abundant fruitfulness.

In his book *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, Philip Simmons, a victim of Lou Gehrig's disease, writes about what his disease, a disease that literally caused him to fall over and over again. He speaks of what it means to learn to fall and how this is connected, first, to letting go in the face of mystery and later into falling into something greater than ourselves.

"...life is not a problem to be solved...but a mystery... problems are to be solved, true mysteries are not...each of us finds his or her own way to mystery. At one time or another, each of us confronts an experience so powerful, bewildering, joyous, or terrifying that all our efforts to see it as a "problem" are futile. Each of us is brought to the cliff's edge. At such moments we can either back away in bitterness or confusion, or leap forward into mystery. And what does mystery ask of us? Only that we be in its presence, that we fully, consciously,

hand ourselves over. That is all, and that is everything. We can participate in mystery only by letting go of solutions. This letting go is the first lesson of falling, and the hardest.” And he goes on:

“Think again of falling as a figure of speech. We fall on our faces, we fall for a joke, we fall for someone, we fall in love. In each of these falls, what do we fall away from? We fall from ego, we fall from our carefully constructed identities, our reputations, our precious selves. We fall from ambition, we fall from grasping, we fall, at least temporarily, from reason. And what do we fall into? We fall into passion, into terror, into unreasoning joy. We fall into humility, into compassion, into emptiness, into oneness with forces larger than ourselves, into oneness with others whom we realize are likewise falling. We fall, at last, into the presence of the sacred, into godliness, into mystery, into our better, (more divine) natures.

People of Holy Cross Japanese Canadian Anglican Church, with Palm Sunday only a week away, join me in asking “What is God’s invitation to us at this moment, a moment informed by many, many experiences of falling?” What is God’s invitation to us here? What is God’s invitation to us now?