

March 17, 2024

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 12:20-33

The Reverend Joe Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



Part of the way through the novel *Infinite Jest*, authored by David Foster Wallace, a character named Hal is deep in a conversation with his brother Mario. They're talking about God, and Hal tells Mario that he and God have a "complicated" relationship. Hal remarks, "I'll say God seems to have a kind of laid-back management style I'm not crazy about. I'm pretty much anti-death," Hal continues. "God looks by all accounts to be pro-death, [and] I'm not seeing how we can get together on this issue." Now there's no doubt that we live in a country deeply polarized by many issues, but if there's one thing I think we can all agree about it's that virtually none of us warm to the idea of death. Put it on the ballot this November as an optional demographic question: "Would you describe yourself as "Pro-Death"? Yes or No." I'm guessing America is going to be pretty well united on the "No" side of the Death issue.

So you can see how it would be concerning to me, as a Christian priest, a leader in Christ's Church, that Jesus talks so much about the need to die. The Church especially in North America is really struggling to retain members, let alone grow, and then in our Sunday morning reading, we hear the central figure of our faith—Jesus himself—saying some things that are really, really bad for PR: "hate your life," "if you don't hate your life, you're never going to really live," "you need to die." This is tough stuff, and it puts not only the preacher but any follower of Jesus in a rather awkward position. Because, as Hal pointed out, this kind of language makes God sound very pro-Death, while the vast majority of humanity—nearly all the people you meet at work, or at the gym, or at the supermarket—all these people not only turn a cold shoulder to Death but they're deeply uncomfortable with the entire topic and will do anything to avoid, obscure, or punt down the road this very unpleasant and unappealing issue.

So what do we, as Christians, do with the fact that Jesus, the figure we follow, speaks such a seemingly pro-Death message? "Those who love their life lose it." Doesn't this just fly in the face of our basic life-affirming values as human beings? How can we, as bright, cosmopolitan 21st-century individuals, possibly follow such morose teachings? Are Jesus' comments in today's gospel just some gloomy remarks from a less enlightened, less hopeful age, some benighted views from a less-evolved era, or do Jesus' words offer something to us this morning besides pessimistic pro-Death platitudes?

In diametric opposition to the notion that Jesus is pro-Death,

I must state plainly that Jesus, in fact, is perhaps the most anti-Death individual in the history of the world, far more than you or me, or certainly more than the Hal character of Infinite Jest. And, even more to the point this morning is the fact that Jesus' anti-Death, full-throated endorsement of Life with a capital L is no more clearly expressed than in passages like the one from today's gospel, where Jesus not only contrasts life and death but in fact uses death against itself: as only Jesus can, he is so anti-Death that he shows his audience—including us—how to turn death back upon itself, using death in order to cultivate the deepest, richest, fullest, most joyful and abundant Life. In Jesus' otherworldly alchemy, death not only is not the final word, but big-D Death actually leads to capital-L Life: in other words, in Jesus' kingdom, death itself dies, and full, abundant Life becomes all in all.

How does this happen? What is Jesus trying to teach us about accessing the Life that transcends Death? What is Jesus saying in our passage this morning? In essence, Jesus is contrasting two kinds of life: On the one hand, there's normal, mundane little-l life, the life of everyday experiences: going to work or school, shopping at the store or online, hoping, planning, saving for summer vacation. When we think of living our lives, these are the everyday experiences we typically imagine, and it's almost certainly the kind of life that the character Hal has in mind when he says he's "anti-Death." While pumping gas or getting a dental checkup aren't exactly wondrously delightful experiences, the fact that they are part of everyday life make them appealing when the alternative is death. But it's precisely this run-of-the-mill, little-l life that Jesus contrasts with a deeper quality of life, a capital-l Life, a quality and peace and joy of Life typically glimpsed only on life's mountaintops, and one which requires some death, according to Jesus, in order to cultivate.

"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." This abundant, fruitful Life is at the heart of Jesus' ministry, at the center of Christ's preaching about the kingdom of God. Jesus, especially in John's gospel, speaks repeatedly about a depth and fertility of Life that sits out there available to us but typically is a bit beyond our grasp not because it's unattainable but because our hands are usually so full of the little-l life activities that distract us, that obscure our vision, that get in the way. The abundant Life Jesus wants to connect us to sits out there ahead of us, just slightly in the distance, and Jesus invites us to follow

him in embracing it. But, he says, the only way to actually get there requires some death: paradoxically, the “grain of wheat” has to die for the Life, hidden within the grain, to be able to spread and grow.

Usually when we hear the “d”-word—“Death”—the mere mention of the word stops us in our tracks, because we, like the character Hal, tend to be pretty anti-Death and want nothing to do with dying. But Jesus again invites us to not give into the fear that arises whenever death of any sort is involved but instead to trust him in the pruning he wants to do so that greater Life can spring forth.

In each of us this morning, there is something that needs to die for us to enjoy a greater fullness and fruitfulness of Life; some image of ourselves, some grudge against another person, some fear that hamstringing our hope, some privilege that walls us off from others. If nothing immediately comes to mind, I invite you to bring it before God in prayer this coming week and ask God what inhibits your enjoyment of greater, fuller, deeper Life.

Despite our cultural caricatures of God, Jesus is stridently not pro-Death: far from it; he actually could not be more anti-Death, and he’s so anti-Death and so promoting of Life, that he shows us that we actually don’t embrace Life as fully or abundantly or fruitfully as we might. Christ reveals that there’s so much more Life to dive into, a capital-L Life enclosed within God’s dreams for us, just awaiting our willingness to let go of those little-l life obsessions that inhibit God’s flow. In his words about the grain of wheat which dies, Christ comes to us this morning and invites us to lay down those petty desires, those too-small goals, beckoning and encouraging us to let go of all that robs us of God’s true, deep, abundant, real Life.

So what is blocking your path to Life today? What self-image, object, relationship, habit, addiction, or voice in your head needs to be set aside in order to move from run-of-the-mill life to real life, Life in big letters? As we move through the remainder of Lent and soon on to Easter, may we heed Hal’s anti-Death call: not by avoiding or denying death, as is so common in our culture, but instead by inviting Jesus to show us where in our lives we need to die so that we might more fully live. This morning I invite each of us to ask our life-creating, life-affirming God to show us what might be limiting our lives, blocking the flow of God’s Spirit into your daily affairs; ask God for the power to submit to God’s pruning, letting God show you what needs to be removed—what must die—so that the wheat grains of your life can more brightly burst with the buds of greater fullness and fruitfulness. Amen.