

Tending New Life
Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 22, 2015
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Jeremiah 31.31-34;
Psalm 51.1-12;
Hebrews 5.5-12;
John 12.20-33

There are certain people, certain conversations, certain poems or passages of certain books that disrupt what you thought you knew and throw you into a holy disorientation. Of all the conversations Jesus has with his disciples, this one in John chapter 12, must have been one of those. The disciples had just watched the crowds gather to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem – events we remember next week on Palm Sunday. Crowds were gathering. Affirmation was accumulating. Jesus had just confirmed that the hour had come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

You can just imagine where their minds must have gone anticipating what that glory might be like; what it would do for them and for their people. And then the conversation takes a disorienting turn “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain...” This is how I imagine their reaction: “WHAAAAT?? What are you talking about? Not this death stuff again!?” What they cannot know in that moment, what must have only made sense to them much later was how Jesus was preparing them for what was ahead.

In many ways I see our texts for this week picking up where Andrew left off in his very thought provoking sermon last week entitled “Rose-colored Glasses.” If you missed that sermon I highly encourage you to go out to the website and listen to it. Andrew was reflecting on what is meant by *belief* when John 3. 16 claims that “God so loved the world, that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who *believes* in him may not perish but have everlasting life.” He offered to us some beautiful reflections informed by some of the companions in his life these days, the writings of Richard Rohr and CS Lewis. Here’s how he defined belief for us: “Allowing that God is

love and opening to that love is belief...Unbelief is choosing to remain in a world full of fear, hiding our true selves, seeking personal gain through manipulation. This is condemnation." In other words, belief and faith have to do with a disposition of the heart toward God more so than some idea about God.

The disposition of heart that Jesus has been cultivating among his disciples is a radical trust. That is the rose-colored glasses Andrew was speaking of last week: to look at the world, to come to the scriptures, to approach all of life with this lens in place – that God is love and that Love endures forever. The reason that we can trust God no matter what may come has to do with the way in which God is forever cultivating and tending new life. The natural world reveals this truth. It is in fact only when a grain of wheat has died and falls to the ground that it can begin to bear much fruit.

When you look at this natural rhythm of creation, you begin to see just how persistent and how pervasive is this force of new life. I have this incredible book that shows pictures of the aftermath of a volcanic eruption. What had been lush forest was burned and charred - total destruction. And then over time - actually much more quickly than scientists expected - new life began to invade. What was a former devastation had completely transformed into a field of wild flowers. Stunning in its beauty and teeming with life. God is forever tending that impulse to bring life from devastation.

But I want to return to something Andrew spoke of last week. When I say that God is tending new life among us, I am not calling on us to be stoics in the face of suffering nor am I advocating that we become some kind of simplistic, sweet Pollyanna. In fact, quite the opposite. As we watch Jesus through the week we have come to call *Holy Week* we will watch him wrestle with his anxiety in the dark of night, we will bear witness to the pain of his betrayal, the anguish of his loneliness as he faces what is to come alone, he will cry out in pain as his body is battered. What he shows us is that when we find ourselves face to face with death in all of its many forms (disappointment, betrayal, suffering) we need to name with breathtaking clarity the shape and dimension of that suffering. Death is real. It is scary. Everything in us recoils when the stench of death comes near. Watch the disciples every time Jesus speaks of it. Yet, all along the

way Jesus names the shape of his suffering. And he knows why he is willing to endure it.

He could have at any moment resorted to some form of self-protection: he could have denied who he truly is and faded into the shadows. He could have manipulated the people around him. He could have lashed out in violent protest. In any number of ways he could have saved his life. To do so would have been to leave us in the downward spiral of self-preservation. No! He came to bring life. He came to reveal the depth of God's love – not just depth of God's love for us – but the way that love shared between us can transform anything even suffering into something greater – stronger – more powerful than it could have ever been before. When Jesus is on the cross taking his final breaths and still manages to utter words of forgiveness, the centurion who witnesses that profound expression of love is completely transfixed, disoriented, changed. The love of God flowed from Jesus to that man and through his witness to all who hear of it. Jesus' life ended in that moment, but the love that was the driving force of his life continued – expanded – and through his resurrection exploded.

This is how God cultivates new life; taking love through the crucible of change into a new form and a new expression. We try to hold on when life is forever changing. We try to keep our faith strong and solid when the fact of the matter is that life is change and some of those changes are going to rock us to the core. That is as it should be. But out of that depth of suffering – out of the ashes – a persistent, pervasive force of new life will emerge. That is what Jesus invites his friends to watch for. That is what he invites us to watch for.

I've been reading a book that I know many of you are reading right now as well entitled *My Bright Abyss*. The author is coming to Western Theological Seminary in a couple of weeks. I've been mesmerized as I read. I can only handle one passage every morning because I need time for it to settle in me. But what I am drawn to in his writing is the way that his faith and his experience of God's love keeps evolving and keeps changing. For so many of us when we finally find love often find ourselves wanting to hold on in order to keep it from slipping through our fingers; not unlike the disciples

wanting to hold on to Jesus. But what Jesus teaches here and what Wiman reflects in this piece I will share in a moment is that love has to move freely within us, between us, and through us.

“Love, which awakens our souls and to which we cling like the splendid mortal creatures that we are, asks us to let it go, to let it be more than it is if it *only* us. To manage this higher form of loving does not mean that we will be showered with earthly delights or somehow be spared awful human suffering. But for as long as we can live in this sacred space of receiving and releasing, and can learn to speak in love’s fluency, then the greater love that is God brings a continuing and enlarging air to our existence.”¹

Every time we come to this table we are invited into a sacred space of receiving the love of God and then releasing that love into the world.

This may seem a simple ritual, a simple meal, but what it points to is a powerful force of new life that the Spirit is tending within us.

So come for all things are now ready.

¹ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 23-24.