

*Dying to Live*  
**John 12:20-33**  
John Breon

Where do people look for life? Where do we go to find real life? I've always been struck by this line from a graveside service, "In the midst of life we are in death. From whom can we seek help?" ("A Service of Committal." *The United Methodist Book of Worship*). Who can help us? Where do we find the life we need?

The Bible tells us that we find life—abundant and eternal life—through dying. This is a main idea of Christian faith. Life comes through dying. Fulfillment comes through letting go. This section in John's Gospel is one place where Jesus talks about dying to live. Let's look at the setting of the passage and see what Jesus does for us and what he calls us to do.

At the beginning of chapter 12, Jesus was having dinner with Lazarus and his family. Lazarus had been dead just a few days before, but Jesus restored him to life. A crowd gathered because they'd heard that Jesus was there and also because they wanted to see Lazarus.

The next day, the crowd that came to see Lazarus and the crowd of pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast were stirred with excitement as Jesus approached the city. We'll look more closely at the events of that day next week on Palm Sunday. The crowds misunderstood Jesus. They were right that he is King, but they didn't know what kind of king he is.

Even as the crowds misunderstood Jesus, the religious authorities both misunderstood him and were threatened by him. Neither the crowds nor the leaders saw who Jesus really was. So they finally rejected him. "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). But by rejecting Jesus, his opponents provided the way for him to be ultimately glorified (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* 876).

One commentator summarizes these events:

The Sanhedrin would have Jesus die in place of Israel (11:50); the crowd shouts for Jesus as King of Israel. But the only anointing that Jesus receives is an anointing for death (12:7); the only crown he will

wear is a crown of thorns (19:2); the only robe he will wear is the cloak of mockery; and when thus presented as their king, the crowd will shout, "Crucify him!" (19:14-15). Thus, they will lift him up to draw all people. (Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John. The Anchor Bible*)

The Pharisees complained that the whole world had gone after Jesus (12:19). That sets the stage for the next scene when some Greeks come and ask to see Jesus. These foreigners came to Jesus' disciple Philip who had a Greek name and who perhaps spoke some Greek. His town of Bethsaida in Galilee was close to Gentile areas, including the Decapolis, the Ten Cities on the east side of Lake Galilee. Possibly, these Greeks are from that region. Some of them may have already known of Philip or some of the other disciples from that area. Philip goes and tells Andrew about the Greeks' request. Andrew and Philip were the first people Jesus invited to be his disciples in this Gospel (1:39, 43). They were some of the first to invite others to come to Jesus. It seems appropriate that they'd be the first to bring a group of non-Jewish people to meet Jesus.

When Philip and Andrew tell Jesus that these Greeks want to see him, Jesus seems to ignore them. But the coming of these Gentiles to Jesus leads him to exclaim that "the hour has come." After saying several times through this Gospel that his hour was not yet or his time had not yet come, Jesus now declares that his time has come. It's now the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified. And when the Son of Man is glorified, he'll give life to Gentiles as well as Jews. For Jesus to be glorified includes suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Jesus compares his death to a seed being planted (v 24). Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and "dies" it remains alone. But by "dying" it produces much fruit, many new seeds. Jesus' death is the means of bringing life to all. His death produces the great harvest of all who will come to him for life.

Jesus not only talks about being planted like a seed, he also speaks of being "lifted up" (v 32). Being lifted up is being exalted to a position of honor. But Jesus is exalted by way of the cross. In the Roman world,

crucifixion, the cross, was the deepest shame. But this worldly shame becomes Jesus' honor and glorification. Honor from God and honor from the world exclude each other (Keener 873).

Jesus is lifted up, glorified, on the cross (see 3:14-15; 8:28). His being glorified is closely related to his refusing to seek his own glory (8:50, 54). He's willing to expend himself fully to fulfill God's purpose. He gives himself to disappear from sight as completely as the grain when the earth covers it. He dies so new life can spring up (F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*). Jesus' prayer for the Father's name to be glorified is a prayer of submission to the Father's will similar to his prayer in the garden: "Not my will but yours, Father" (Matthew 26:39). It wasn't easy. He says here that his soul is troubled. But his will is to do the Father's will, to fulfill his purpose.

So we have these two images of Jesus' death—planted like a seed that produces much fruit and being lifted up on the cross to draw all people to himself. These images show that Jesus gave his life in order to give life to many others.

Redemption comes through God's self-sacrifice. Not grand displays of power, but the weakness of Christ on the cross saves us.

And salvation isn't forced on us. Christ on the cross *draws* us to himself, attracts us to himself. The Holy Spirit uses that attraction to tug at our hearts and call for our response.

A boy was explaining his response to go forward and receive Christ at an evangelistic service. He said, "My mom loves me and I love her back. My dad loves me and I love him back. It seemed that if God loves me so much I should love God back."

Jesus' love and sacrifice—the cross—is for all the world. "I will draw all people to myself" (v 32). Those Greeks who came to see Jesus got included and everyone who will come is included.

Along with all this is the call to discipleship. Jesus calls us to give up our lives. If we'll be his followers, we have to let go of our lives and lose ourselves in commitment to Christ. The cross is for us as his followers.

Jesus' followers share his sufferings to share his glory. What's true of Jesus (v 24) is true of his followers as well (25-26). Jesus did what he did in a unique way. He stood alone against the power of sin and death so the rest

of us won't have to. At the same time, he pioneered the road, he blazed the trail where his servants, his followers, must go after him. This may be part of his challenge to his followers and to the Greeks. "If they really want to 'see' him, to get to know him and understand what he's about for themselves, they must get ready to be 'planted' in the same way, to risk all in his service" (Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*).

To "love" our life here means giving it priority over the interests of God's kingdom. To "hate" our life is to give priority to the interests of God's kingdom over our own life. Serving Jesus means following him, imitating him in some way, being the kind of servant he was. Disciples facing the Teacher's death have to give up our vested interest in the world and follow Jesus in the way of servanthood (J. Ramsey Michael, *John. A Good News Commentary*).

A writer named Barbara Brown Taylor expresses this well:

What he is telling us is that if we do everything in our power to protect our lives the way they are—if we successfully prevent change, prevent conflict, prevent pain—then at the end we will find that we had no life at all. But if we hate our lives in this world, which as far as I am concerned can only mean if we hate all the ways we cheapen our lives by chasing comfort, safety, and superiority in this world—if we hate that enough to stop it and start chasing God instead—then there will no end to the abundance of our lives. (*God in Pain* 62-63)

This applies to the church as well as to individuals. If we insist that the church be for us, then it will only be for us. And it'll eventually wither and die. As a congregation, we need to see ourselves as being here for the sake of others. We don't exist as a church just for our own sake, but for others. Claiming that reality means dying to ourselves and finding life. Refusing that reality means just dying.

"Resurrection power works best in graveyards" (Ray Steadman). Jesus calls us to put to death those things in our lives that keep us from becoming all that God intends us to be. In the Bible, dying to self means recognizing the many ways we avoid accepting our need for God and

recognizing our own inadequacy. The wonder of the gospel is that God gives "beauty for ashes." Out of the ash heap of our lives new life and wonder spring forth (Mike Regele, *Death of the Church* 198-99, 201, 206, 239).

If we lose ourselves in Christ we're like seed sown that produces fruit. God uses us to extend his love, his invitation to the world. God uses us to show the Savior lifted up on the cross. Like Jesus, we allow ourselves to be poured out, to be covered up for God's purpose to be fulfilled.

Jesus was raised from the dead because he was willing to die. In our weakness, in giving ourselves, in our surrender God gives strength to us and uses what we give him. God can only pick up what we're willing to lay down.

A college president and preacher named Dennis Kinlaw once told about taking a trip to China. There he visited the grave of Robert Morrison, a nineteenth-century missionary. The Dutch East India Co. hadn't supported his mission and the Chinese weren't very interested in being evangelized. Morrison worked during the day and studied Chinese at night. He worked for thirty years and never had a convert. But before he died, the Bible was translated into Chinese.

Dennis Kinlaw had just been in a Chinese church with 200-300 members, mostly under the age of thirty. He asked the pastor how they came to Christ. Mostly, they were children of believers or friends of children of believers. Through the years the Chinese believing home has been built around the Bible. They didn't have a church. When the missionaries had to leave China in the 1940s there were perhaps one million Christians in China. The estimate today is that there are sixty-seven million Christians in China. Standing at Robert Morrison's grave, Kinlaw thought of the rejection, the vulnerability, the being unwanted, the loneliness, heartache, and pain. "But when a grain of wheat gives itself up to the purposes of God and takes its hands off itself, there will be fruit" (OK Conference on Evangelism, Oklahoma City, 1985).

Are we willing to let our lives be seeds that will grow into a harvest for God's glory? That's a big part of what following Jesus means.

Jesus tells us what will happen if we follow him this way. We'll be with him and the Father will honor us. That's another way of saying what verse 25 says about having eternal life, because eternal life is related to being with Jesus in the Father's love. Jesus wants his disciples to know that they'll be with him and that his love is stronger than death. Later he makes it clear that they'll join him in the Father's presence and see the fullness of the glory he receives from the Father. The Father glorifies the Son. When we serve and follow the Son, the Father honors us and gives us a share in his glory.

Jesus mentions the world is being judged and the prince or ruler of this world is being driven out. That's the kind of talk people were looking for from a messiah. They thought that next he might tell them to sharpen their swords and help him attack the Roman garrison beside the temple. But that's not the kind of Messiah Jesus is. He did aim to overthrow the kingdom of the world and replace it with the kingdom of God. He was driving out the devil who sought to rule the world. But Jesus' victory came through being "lifted up" on a cross. "That's how the world would be rescued. That's how God, the true God, the God of astonishing, generous love, would be glorified. Swords don't glorify the creator-God. Love does. Self-giving love best of all" (Wright).

The last part of this chapter concludes Jesus' public ministry. It summarizes the continued resistance of some of the Jews, especially their leaders. In spite of Jesus' glorious signs, many wouldn't believe. At the same time, many did believe. But they kept it a secret. They wouldn't confess their faith because of fear and because they loved praise from people more than praise from God. That's not what Jesus intends for his disciples. We declare our faith knowing that if people reject us, God honors us.

A United Methodist preacher named Eddie Fox visited a church in Estonia. For the benediction, they asked, "As you go into the world, do you have anything to declare?" The congregation's response was "Jesus Christ is Lord!" As Eddie returned to the U. S., the customs officer at the airport asked, "Do you have anything to declare?" What do you think Eddie said? "Jesus Christ is Lord!" (Jim Buskirk, First UMC, Tulsa, 10/13/91, audio tape).

Jesus gives his final public invitation and challenge in verses 44-50. It still comes to us. Yield, give in, surrender to Jesus' love and sacrifice attracting you to God. Come out of the darkness into the light. And declare that Jesus Christ—lifted up on the cross, in resurrection and ascension—is Lord. Give yourself to him, lose your life to enter into his life.

So here we sit, the local field of wheat who owe our lives to [Jesus]. If he had not died, we would not be here. Because he did, we are. He has spoken to us about the way of life and the way of death, letting us know that these are the only two choices and that none of us may abstain. When the hour comes, each of us has a grain of wheat with which to cast our votes. It is the grain of our lives, and all of creation is holding its breath to see what we will do with it. (Taylor 65)

Let's pray. And I want to use a prayer from Henri Nouwen.

Help me, O Lord, to let my old self die, to let die the thousand big and small ways in which I am still building up my false self and trying to cling to my false desires. Let me be reborn in you and see through you the world in the right way, so that all my actions, words, and thoughts can become a hymn of praise to you.

I need your loving grace to travel on this hard road that leads to the death of my old self and to a new life in and for you. (quoted in Regele 240)