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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 17, 2024
John 12:20-33

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning, the fifth Sunday of Lent, comes from our Gospel reading. Specifically, these lines:

“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.”

These are stark words as we begin our journey to Holy Week and the Cross.

At the start of our passage, some Greek-speaking Godfearers have come hoping to meet Jesus. They probably wanted a chance to experience some of that charisma and transformative teaching they had heard so much about, so they approach Philip looking for an introduction. All that comes of it is that Jesus starts spouting off about death and life and judgment and being lifted up and His hour being at hand.

What is going on here?

On the one hand, our entire lesson today is pointing to the Crucifixion. In case we are really dense, John even adds this clarifying line to the end of the speech. “He said this to indicate the kind of death He was to die.”

But that doesn’t change the fact that Jesus is also giving instructions for His followers. He really *is* warning that those who love their life will lose it, and with His passion and death drawing near, Jesus doesn’t have time to be anything but straightforward with His disciples. We better take Him at His word.

Those who love their lives will lose them, but those who hate their lives will keep them for eternal life.

But why, oh why, does Jesus tell us we need to *hate* our life?!

I hate my life! This is the sort of overwrought statement we expect from a teenager who has just been grounded. Or it's the sort of statement we might worry about if it came from a person with a history of depression. It sounds gloomy and defeatist. It is certainly not the kind of sentiment we associate with joyful, spirit-filled Christian living.

Surely this must be an exaggeration. This must be Jesus being polemical to drive home a point, right? Like when He said it would better to pluck out an eye or cut off a hand if those body parts caused us to sin. Virtually nobody in the history of Christendom has interpreted *that* particular passage from the Sermon on the Mount literally, except for a handful of unfortunate fanatics.

Maybe this line from today's Gospel is like that – exaggeration for effect.

Or perhaps it's one of those paradoxes that Jesus is so fond of, like when He tells His disciples that the first will be last and the last will be first. (Matthew 20:16) Paradoxes are His way of pushing back against convention and leading us deeper into the mysteries of God.

When Jesus says that those who love their lives will lose them and those who hate their lives will save them, maybe it's just a paradoxical way of saying we should pay more attention to our immortal souls.

Well, yes, there is some truth to that too.

But maybe what we really need to look at is language use and idioms. Hate doesn't really mean hate in the sense that we typically understand it. When Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple," He did not mean it quite as harshly as it sounds. (Luke 14:26)

Hate is a figure of speech here. It is obviously hyperbolic. Jesus is not telling followers to literally hate their families; He is telling them that they must put Him first.

All three of these ways of reading this passage that I have mentioned – as polemic, as paradox, and as hyperbole – are all legitimate and important angles for understanding our text. Every time we read the Bible, we need to be prepared to do some interpretation. We need to know something about the context, the genre, the style, and the use of language. We need to compare the passage in question with the rest of the Bible, because Scripture interprets

Scripture. The stranger or more controversial the text, the more important these nuances become.

But there is something we must be careful about. We must be very careful about adding so many interpretive caveats and qualifications that we obscure the plain words of our Lord. As though we were attempting to soften the blow of His harder teachings or trying to make them more palatable to our own sensibilities.

And this, brothers and sisters, is one of those passages. It is very tempting to minimize the stark message of these words: those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life will keep it for eternal life.

It goes against everything that we have been taught, doesn't it?

Where in today's world would you hear a message like this?

We are told constantly that we need to love ourselves. It starts with children. We are told we need to do everything to raise their self-esteem. We generally encourage children to make the most of their lives, to pursue their dreams, to develop their passions and interests. Who would ever want their child to hate his or her life?

The message from advertisers, but also from the culture in general, is that we are worth it. We deserve the things we want. We have a right to pursue our interests, our desires, and our very happiness. It's written right there in one of our founding American documents, The Declaration of Independence.

It's also the message of most of our psychologists and counselors. Their goal is to heal patients from whatever is troubling them so that they can feel whole and love life again.

Jesus's words also contradict some of the basic tenets of evolutionary biology, which in case you hadn't noticed is probably THE dominant source of most of the so-called ethics of today's world. We are, some experts tell us, wired by our very genes to put our own lives and wellbeing first, along with those of our offspring. That's the survival instinct. The idea of hating one's life, they would say, is utterly antithetical to our most basic biological intuitions. The species wouldn't even survive if most of us felt that way.

There is something to be said about all these life-affirming instincts. Certainly I'm not suggesting we should want children to have *low* self-esteem. I'm not saying that counselors and therapists *shouldn't* help people recover their joy

in living. I'm not arguing with Thomas Jefferson and saying that we should *not* have the right to personal autonomy and to pursue our own flourishing.

Living a life you love seems like a pretty self-evident good to me. But I am a Christian and to be a Christian and a follower of Jesus means I have to take Him at His word. So I have to pause and consider the possibility that loving my life might not be the end goal, and I have to ask you to consider the possibility too.

What if Jesus really means it literally – that we should hate our life in order to save it? Does it mean we should deny ourselves the things that give us pleasure and spend all day on our knees instead? Does it mean we should never care how our lives and fortunes turn out because we should be worried only about getting to heaven? Does it mean we should recklessly embrace martyrdom whenever the chance presents itself?

To better understand what Jesus is getting at, we need to look at the line that precedes His shocking statement. “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.”

I am an avid gardener. All year long I look forward to the day when I order my flower and vegetable seeds. I should also confess that I am not a terribly good gardener, and most of what I plant never makes it to maturity, but that doesn't stop me from being enthusiastic every spring when it's time to start again.

Seed packets are beautiful; maybe that's why I like this part so much. Each packet has a picture of what's inside. Not literally of course, because what's inside right now are some tiny specks of things that would slip right through your fingers if you weren't careful. But a picture of what those tiny specks will *become* if you care for them right. Healthy, colorful carrots, squash, and tomatoes. Breathtakingly gorgeous flowers of every shape and size.

But for those beautiful plants to emerge and flourish, those little seeds have to die. In a sense. The seed has to go into the soil and there it will break apart and transform beyond recognition. It will not stay a seed, if it is healthy and if it is cared for right. That is because it is not supposed to stay a seed. It is supposed to disintegrate and reemerge as something infinitely better.

Now indulge me for a moment and imagine something crazy. What if a seed developed consciousness and said to itself, I don't like this arrangement! I don't want to fall into the cold, dark soil. I like my life the way it is. I like it here in this cozy seed packet! I don't want to die!

It's an absurd thought, not just because seeds can't philosophize, but because it would be completely unnatural for a seed to want to stay a seed. God, Who made everything in heaven and on earth, made seeds too, but they only become what they are supposed to be when they go through the natural process of dying as seeds and emerging as new plants.

If a seed clung to life as a seed, it really would lose its life in the end, because the whole process would be stopped in its tracks.

Is not the Christian life just like that?

When God created us in His image, He had a plan for us and for our flourishing. He knows our potential and our possibilities better than we do. But we would rather stay put in the seed packet.

It's called self-will. It's called sin. It's all the ways we cling to our own desires and bad habits even when they are making us miserable. When we insist on our way at the expense of others. When we put our needs ahead of everybody else's. When we have a vision for the way our life was supposed to turn out and when that doesn't materialize, we become bitter and despondent, instead of turning our disappointment over to the Lord. It's when we balk at the idea of obedience and continue down our path of self-destruction thinking that we are somehow being true to ourselves and only losing ourselves in the process.

The real paradox here is that what often passes for self-love is actually a form of self-hatred. Putting ourselves and our will first and living in rebellion against God is not actually a way to be happy; it's a way to be miserable. What God wants for us is a million times better than anything we could imagine, but the only way to make progress in that new life is to let go of the old one we are clinging to. Or to put it bluntly, to hate it.

Our Wednesday evening book club has been reading C.S. Lewis's masterpiece of spiritual psychology, *The Screwtape Letters*. For those of you who have never read it, it is a novel in the form of letters from a senior devil to a junior devil who is assigned to tempt one particular individual and lead him astray. Think the exact opposite of a guardian angel. The novel is brilliant for its insight into temptations and the ways we deceive ourselves about our relationship with God.

This past Wednesday, we happened to read a passage together that made me think of today's Gospel lesson. Screwtape, the senior tempter, is explaining to Wormwood, the junior tempter, that Satan's goal is to detach men and women from themselves. His goal is to so utterly destroy human beings that they lose

their very selves and become his mindless slaves. But, Screwtape warns, God (Whom he perversely refers to as the Enemy – this is why the book can be disorienting at first!) also wants to detach men from themselves. Wormwood, says Screwtape, should not be deluded into thinking that God and Satan share the same goal.

When God talks of humans losing their selves, “He only means abandoning the clamor of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality and boasts... that when they are wholly His they will be themselves more than ever.” Screwtape is disgusted that God could love – quote – the “little vermin” so much, but Lewis’s point is this. To die to self in the Christian sense is not to lose oneself but to gain oneself, the true self that God created. That means that if you die to the world and live again in Christ, you will find a life of joy and abundance such as you never imagined.

As we press on towards Holy Week and look forward to celebrating the resurrection, like the seed that bursts forth in spring with new life, let’s pause and take Jesus at His word.

Ask yourself, what part of your life does God want you to hate? And yes, hate in this context does mean something like reject or turn away from. Where do you need to die to self? What part of your life, what sin or habit or way of thinking, is keeping you from a deeper relationship with Jesus? In what ways are you rejecting God’s Word or God’s Law? What is keeping you from flourishing as God intended you to flourish, as His beloved child?

Lent is drawing to a close, and Easter is near. Let’s follow Jesus to His cross by learning to hate everything that separates us from Him and learning to love Him more than our very selves. After all, He loved us enough to die for us.

To Him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.