

Page | 1 Every time I go north in the springtime, I am overwhelmed by the beauty of forsythia, daffodils, and azaleas and redbud trees. They are shockingly beautiful as they stand in contrast to the dead grey bark of oak and other deciduous trees with no leaves. My family has grown accustomed to my saying as we drive, "Look at that tree! See those blooms! Don't miss the daffodils." Of course, here we have beautiful flowers all year – the changes between winter and spring are subtle. The greens get a little greener, and the grass begins to grow again after a two-three month break. A dreary, wet and cold day in the north is depressing, and that is why most of us are here now. On Wednesday night, I was singing with the children and youth that wonderful song, The Hymn of Promise, a favorite of Barbara Staton, and of Richard and Don's mom Barbara Deibert. *In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree, in cocoon's a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!* And then we got to this line: *In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be.* That's when I realized that the little ones could not relate much to that – most of them having never experienced much snow or winter. But they could relate to germination, the planting of seeds, and of the need for the seed to be buried and die, before a plant could grow from that teeny tiny seed. We had fun planting. Hear what Jesus says about the need for a grain to fall to earth and die.

### John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup> They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." <sup>22</sup> Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup> Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. <sup>27</sup> "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. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify

it again." <sup>29</sup> The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." <sup>30</sup> Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup> Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." <sup>33</sup> He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. (NRS)

Jesus is clearly troubled in this moment as he reckons with what is happening to him. He says "my soul is troubled" He would like to ask God to spare him, but he says, "it is for this reason I have come." This is anticipating the struggle in the garden of Gethsemane, just as we are anticipating his death on this Sunday before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday which is next week. Only yesterday did it hit me, because nowhere is it suggested in the scriptural index of the hymnal that these verses are connected to the last verse and first refrain of one of my favorite hymns: *Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore. Let the gift of thy salvation be our glory evermore. Grant us wisdom. Grant us courage for the facing of this hour.*

For the facing of this hour. From the temptation story at the beginning of his ministry to his death, Jesus never gave in to weak resignation to the evils he deplored. But we see he voiced the struggle. And because he struggled and overcame, we are strengthened in our struggle – to avoid weak resignation, cynicism, and stay the course of faithfulness. Jesus said, "I'm struggling to make the right choice here. It is hard, but I know that I came to draw all people to myself. So I will stay faithful. I will not over-love my life. I will hate my life enough to sacrifice for others. I will be willing to go down to the dirt, and be cracked open, in order to be fruitful for others.

But there is this tension. We live in the tension of what makes for germination in our lives. We can put a seed in the soil, and pour on so much water that the seed rots instead of roots. See the slight difference in those two words. Too much water is like the person who has no boundaries and get too immersed in the deep waters of life. Rot.

A seed can fall to the ground and get burned by too much sun and no water. This is the person who is working too hard at other aspects of life, and does not take a time to quench thirst, to drink of the living waters of Jesus. Burn out happens for people who try to be everything to everybody.

Ample fertile soil is good protection from too much water and too much sun. This could be seen as the bread of life – what nourishes growth. Jesus had a lot to say in another place about the right kind of soil – not rocky, because roots need to go deep, and not filled with thorns and weeds that will choke off growth.

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A seed can fall to the ground, get the right amount of water and soil, but with no sun, it will never produce fruit. I think of sun as being the warmth we get from others' love – both God and other people. We need this loving acceptance in order to shine. It is the warmth and light of those relationships that change us from the inside out.

That love gives us courage for our greatest challenge in life -- to let ourselves drop down into the fertile soil. For that is a letting go, a trusting that even as we free fall, we will be caught by the loving kindness of God who can turn our living sacrifice into fruitfulness for the world. And once we fall, not being defensive. The seed that develops a thick skin is not willing to crack open and grow into a beautiful new plant. The seed needs to undergo imbibition – which is filling up with water, those that the thick skin, the shell can crack open.

We know that letting go and cracking open are good. But we still resist. We want to maintain control. We don't want anyone to see our messy and tender insides. We want to cling to the world's values in life – success, popularity. We want to acquire, not sacrifice. We want to build up our own reputation, but Jesus says here and elsewhere – Blessed are those who are meek, poor in spirit and woe to you when people think well of you. We really do not want to believe that lowly servanthood is the glory. It is when you are taking out the trash, and cleaning the bathrooms that you are closer to glory than when sit down to a delicious meal in a fine restaurant. It is when you are holding the head of a sick family member or friend while they hang over the toilet more than when you are receiving or watching them receive some award or trophy – that you are living in glory.

Every time I visit my mother, for the last 13 years, I have the honor of washing her feet and giving her a pedicure, and though it is a far from glorious job, I know how much she appreciates my doing what she cannot do for herself. And I have come to find it satisfying, just like digging in the dirt to plant seeds or straightening

chairs in this chapel, or cleaning up the Montreat house for groups that are coming for summer conferences, or taking someone's crabby behavior and finding a graceful and healthy communicative response, because by doing so, I can help break open the shell – both mine and theirs.

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St. Patrick had a hardened heart to the Christian faith in which he was raised in Britain, until at age 16 he was taken by Irish raiders into slavery. After six years of suffering, of life in the dirt, his faith and life had been cracked open and he began to grow and be fruitful. Released to return to his homeland, he later returned to the land of his captivity, where the Spirit had opened his heart to know and love the Irish, whom the Brits disrespected. He is credited with baptizing over 100,000 people, ordaining hundreds of priests, starting monasteries that inspired a discipleship-oriented Celtic faith that helped preserve Christianity during the Middle Ages.

Germination requires our dropping to the ground, from our high pedestal to a more lowly spot, a dying to self's glory, in order to glorify God by our dying fruitfulness. Hanging out in the sunshine of God's love, watching out for boundaries, letting some things go, so we don't drown in too much water, finding nourishment in the rich soil of Word and sacrament, and allowing ourselves to be cracked open in the pain and joy of living. That's how we become fruitful for the world.

Jesus said <sup>26</sup> [Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.](#) When Christ himself is troubled by what he is facing, he reminds himself of his calling and then gets reassurance. But then funny enough, he says that reassurance is for us – not him. And the reassurance is two-fold – God's name will be glorified and glorified again and Christ is drawing all people to himself. Just as last week you heard about that God did not send the Son to condemn but to save the world, so we see here that the whole world is drawn in by Christ. So there is nothing to fear. Dying is inevitable, but so is new life. Break open, grow, and be fruitful. [I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.](#) (Rom. 12:1-2)