



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

## A Life to Die For

Lent 5B, John 12.20-33

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Ardelle and I are not birders. But the last time we hiked in Shelby Forest, we spent a while locating the woodpecker we could hear exploring the dead limbs of an oak tree. As lovely and familiar as this sight may be, it's a little unsettling if you stop and consider the self-inflicted violence that's producing those pleasant little knocking sounds. Especially if you've ever run your own face into a tree.

It seems like a cruel evolutionary joke that something in a woodpecker compels it to thump its beak on trees in search of a little nourishment or shelter. It reminds me of an early episode of *The Office* in which Jim keeps putting nickels in the handset of Dwight's telephone, making it a little heavier each day. Then after a week or so, he takes them all out, and calls Dwight's extension so he can watch him clobber himself when he picks up the now weightless receiver.

Nature seems to be pulling something similar on the woodpecker. Day after day after day the poor bird investigates the world by banging its beak against it. Actually, I guess some days are like that for all of us. Or some years. Like 2020.

But the strange impulses of a woodpecker are also part of a larger natural process: the process of finding nutrients in dead and dying things. The branches being checked out by the birds in Shelby Forest had lost their leaves and their bark. They were gray and weathered and worn. Because dying limbs make good homes for the living bugs that make meals for woodpeckers. Of course, the bugs can't go on living once they become meals. This is the way of the things of the earth.

So, one message the woodpecker taps out thousands of times a day is a line from the burial office in the Book of Common Prayer: "In the midst of life we are in death." In nature we can see that life and death are not opposites doing battle. They're more like two weights balanced on a fulcrum. Or a to and a fro, a teeter and a totter, each helpless and meaningless without the other. In the midst of life, we are in death. Just look around.

It might be a little odd to talk about life and death in the natural world when we've been reading from the gospel of John. Because, in John, Jesus seems much more divine, much less bound by the laws of nature, than he does in the other gospels. Especially Mark, which we'll read for much of this year. For example, earlier in John, when his disciples are just trying to get him to eat something after a long day, Jesus says, "I have food to eat that you do not know about... My food is to do the will of the one who sent me..." That's John's Jesus. Even eating seems more mystical than biological.

So, it's at least a little curious that Jesus uses an instance of a life-giving death in nature to tell a truth about his life and about ours, when Phillip and Andrew come to tell him that some Greeks would like to see him. True to form, we haven't the foggiest idea what it has to do with those inquiring Greeks, but Jesus says, "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." The grain that never dies is the grain that never comes fully to life.

The Jesus who seems so spectacularly supernatural in John is telling his friends that his death, on one level, will be an instance of the most natural truth of all. All life, all fruitfulness, is one part death. Our lives included.

Of course, as soon as Jesus tells the mini parable about the wheat grain, he says, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” One minute Jesus is the folksy agrarian teacher; the next he’s the doomsday prophet again, saying that anyone with any sense hates this life.

Can’t you imagine one of those flashing arrow signs in the front yard of a country church bearing the message, “Hate your life. John 12:25. Dinner on the grounds this Sunday”? Really, Jesus? “Hate your life” is part of the good news?

As we try to make a little sense of this passage, we should place it in context. The lectionary has us jumping around this time of year, which can be confusing. What we read today actually immediately follows the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the moment we celebrate next week on Palm Sunday. So Holy Week has just begun for Jesus. His crucifixion is near. He’s not telling jokes and pulling pranks. He’s as grave as the grave.

And his first step toward the cross involves a letting go. He has to let go of the perfectly normal impulse, the perfectly natural reflex, to preserve his own life. Because he believes that if he saves himself, he will somehow lose himself. Something close to the core of who Jesus is would have to be forfeited for him to get out of this fate. He has to follow through with his encounter with the religious authorities, jealous and vengeful and breathing murder ever since he raised Lazarus from the dead. He has to follow through with his encounter with Pilate and the empire he represents. And maybe the harsh truth he is trying to convey to his friends is that something more fundamental would die forever if Jesus compromised himself to keep from dying on Good Friday.

So as divine and otherworldly as Jesus appears to be, he tells us that what was happening in and through him could be described in perfectly natural terms. His death and the spread of life and grace that would result was not a departure from the way things are. The cross was and is, to borrow a line from a poet, “the pattern and mirror of the acts of the earth.”<sup>1</sup> It might not be trite even to say that we see the shape of a cross in the woodpecker’s foraging. The pattern is all around us. And in us.

Because John goes on to say that Jesus’ life and death will exert a pull on all of us, like a force of nature, if you will. Jesus tells us not only that we have to lose our lives to save them sometimes, not only that the power of his life will be multiplied in his death, but also that the fruitfulness of our lives and our deaths is ultimately in God’s hands, not ours. A larger force is at work, one that can help us let go of our death grip on life.

You see even the lives and deaths of insects and trees make little sense until we expand our vision. Until we see the broader patterns and forces and cycles of Life with a capital L. And the Christian good news is that just as something compels wheat grains to produce new life when they die, just as something compels woodpeckers to rap their beaks against dying trees, something good and holy is drawing our lives toward a good and holy ultimate purpose. “I, when I am lifted up from the earth,” Jesus said, “will draw all people to myself.” Some of the ancient texts say “all things.” All people, if not all the things in the universe that ever were, are drawn to Jesus by the power of his cross.

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<sup>1</sup> Kinnell, Galway. “To Christ Our Lord.” *Collected Poems*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2017

There are forces alive in this world that draw every living thing into the future. Jesus says the cross is like that. Jesus says the cross *is* that.

As creation constantly gives itself away, as one life within it is laid down for the next, as rot becomes nourishment for fallen seeds, where they die to become something new, we see that the cross and resurrection were not strange exceptions to the way things are. You and I are, when we cling fearfully to our separate lives at all costs, even imagining life in Christ exempts or insulates us from loss and hurt and even death. It does not. But it does place our lives and our deaths in a larger story of love.

Julian of Norwich once said, “If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love.”

This is the hope of the cross. Not that we are kept always safe. But that our lives and all lives, and every aspect of them, gifts and loss, hurts and joys, whether we’re falling or whether we’re rising, all of our lives and even our deaths are held in the love that made us and all creation. And it is only because of the force of that love, still drawing all things to itself, that we can begin to trust something else Dame Julian said. Which is that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Amen.