

Jeremiah 31: 31-34  
2 Corinthians 3: 1-6  
John 12: 20-36

Unless the Grain of Wheat Falls...

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Mary R. Brownlow

Do you ever start thinking about a very commonly used phrase or word pairing, and then think about it so hard that it does not make sense? For instance to “pull over.” We all know what it means: when one is driving a car, one moves it to the side of the road or the side of traffic. But how did “pull” and “over” (*with gestures*) come to mean that? It doesn’t make sense. Then there is the verb to “give up.” To yield control or possession of, to abandon oneself to a particular feeling, to despair, to cease doing or attempting something especially, as an admission of defeat. Give. Up.

I have been reading a book of essays (actually blog entries) by Ursula Le Guin, the wonderful fantasy novelist who died 2 months ago. Back in 2012 she contemplated the following bit of old news:

*“On October 5, 1947, in the first televised White House address, President Truman asked Americans to refrain from eating meat on Tuesdays and poultry on Thursdays to help stockpile grain for starving people in Europe.”*

There’s a lot to unpack there, but Le Guin focused on the fascinating and quaint idea, or the fascinating and quaint country, where the “president thought Americans would a) see the connection between meat and grain, and b) be willing to forego a luxury element of their diet in order to give away a more essential food to hungry foreigners on another continent, some of whom we’d been killing, and some of whom had been killing us two years earlier.” Give. Up. Give. Away.

One of the things a lot of people find difficult about the Christian faith is the apparent emphasis on self-denial. When Jesus uses words like those from today's gospel reading - "Those who love their own life will lose it; those who hate their own life in this world will keep it for eternal life" - it is easy to be put off, to hear the message as being very negative and not exactly life-affirming. And, during Lent, when so many religious messages are about giving things up in order to discipline our minds and bodies into submission, it can feel like a really bleak message. We might even fall into the trap of thinking that this is what Christianity is all about: self-denial as an end in itself, rather than as part of a process of growth and transformation. One key to remember is that word the translated “life” here is actually *psuche*, which means soul, or breath of life. We are talking about our animating identity: who we are. Who we are needs transforming.

But remember the context of this statement about loving and hating life. Jesus gives an image to help us out: "Amen, I tell you, a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces much fruit." Jesus saw a link between releasing our grip on some aspect of our identity as we know it, and receiving the gift of life in all its fullness.

Even though this horticultural lesson is common sense, is something we learned about in school, is something we have seen since childhood, we still find it quite difficult to apply it to many

areas of our lives. In some ways, Jesus is teaching us something pretty simple: it is not possible to have everything or be everything at the same time. You can't be a killer and a peace-maker at the same time. You can't work 100 hours a week at the office and still have 100 hours a week of quality time with your children. You can't transform yourself into a new person and refuse to change at the same time. You have to make some choices. You have to give something up.

I read a story about Charles Darwin recently: Darwin, as a young man, was out doing his research, and he was really excited about collecting beetles. I mean, really excited. As he wrote in his autobiography: "I will give proof of my zeal: one day, on tearing off some old bark, I saw two rare beetles and seized one in each hand; then I saw a third and new kind, which I could not bear to lose, so that I popped the one which I held in my right hand into my mouth. Alas it ejected some intensely acrid fluid, which burnt my tongue so that I was forced to spit the beetle out, which was lost, as well as the third one."

A lesson on letting go for and from Darwin!

Back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, the people of Judah were forced to learn the lessons of letting go. They saw their leadership fail them, they were conquered by a foreign power, and many of them had to give up their homes and go into exile. Against their will, then, they had no home, no temple, no leadership, and they felt that they had lost the moral compass of their covenant with God. The angry prophet Jeremiah, who had been warning them about all this, now changes his tune. In tender tones of consolation, he is able to speak about broken and renewed covenants. Walter Brueggemann calls this "an unexpected, inexplicable eruption of prophetic poetry." The new comes only when we relinquish the old. So now they have the hope of new covenant, new temple, new life, new possibilities.

As long as there is denial and delusion, nothing genuinely new can happen. But when reality is faced - in this case the reality of a failed covenant between the leadership and vulnerable people - new possibility becomes imaginable. A grain of wheat has fallen, and died, as it should. The external law, the external covenant, the *pro forma* relationship with God needed to come to an end. The prophetic poet looks forward to the time when all will "know God." Knowing God is not the same as technical information, theological or otherwise. It is not the same as an emotional intimacy either. This knowing, this writing on the heart is more like letting go, more like being ready, in this time, in this hour, to allow God's tender justice to define us. It is more like letting a relationship with God change our attitudes, mold our actions, and blow away our fears. Jeremiah imagines a time when the people give up, give in, and let go. The grain of wheat falls, and God's forgiveness and truth begin to blossom within.

Our Gospel stories show us Jesus, who in turn often models this process. We see one who gives up a settled home and family, gives up comfort and security, to teach about and demonstrate newness of life. In today's reading, he seems both determined and vulnerable, both courageous and distressed. He makes it clear that true courage does not replace fear, but goes alongside it. This in itself is a model for us and a comfort to us: we too may feel dismayed at what we have to give up, even when we know it is for the best. His "soul was troubled": same word, *psuche*. His very identity felt threatened by the changes that were coming. And yet, in that soliloquy, he wonders, "should I ask to be saved from this hour, this fate? No, this is the reason I am here: to glorify God by being a grain of wheat that falls and is transformed."

Jesus, as he often does, speaks in a kind of code, and speaks, not of being planted, but of being lifted up. The Gospel writer lets us know in an aside that Jesus says all this, “to indicate the kind of death he was to die” - and so the passage invites a fresh look at how we understand that death. For the early Christians, the focus is not really on the death but rather on what the death makes possible: the resurrection, the ascension, and of course, the bearing of “much fruit,” the birth of a faith community which will do even greater things. This is what Jesus has in mind when he speaks about grains and souls and “when I am lifted up”: a symphony in which his death is only the first movement, and which will swell to even more magnificent crescendos on Easter morning and beyond. Though, in coming days, and through Holy Week, we will follow Jesus to the cross, we are reminded not to focus exclusively on that death. There are stronger forces at work here. God is working in the world with a story of sacred irony. They thought they were executing a criminal and hiding him in a hole in the ground, but actually they were planting him like a seed.

I don't know what you need to relinquish in this life in order to be transformed. I don't know whether eating less meat - either to save another from hunger or the world from environmental damage - will be your sacrifice and your legacy. I don't know whether your need to get rid of your burdensome book or record collections as an exercise in letting go. I do know that my life has been formed by other peoples' sacrifices - my parents', my teachers', my friends', those of people I don't even know. This has taught me to understand a little bit about the outpouring of God's love for all of us: the Great Love Give-Away, written on each of our hearts. This has also made me wonder, how will the grain of wheat fall from my hand (once I am brave enough to release it) and what fruit will it bear?

Every week, printed in our bulletin, we have a paragraph or two describing the special mission offering for the month. For March and April, it is One Great Hour of Sharing, an ecumenical effort which seek to help those who suffer the effects of disaster, conflict, or severe economic hardship. Interesting fact: it was started at almost the exact time that Harry Truman spoke to the nation about giving up steak on Tuesdays and chicken on Thursdays. Now, I am pretty sure that a lot of you are like me: when a notice shows up in print over and over, I tend not to read it very careful, if at all. But today part of the notice speaks precisely to our Gospel message, our Good News. I quote (and you can read along with me aloud if you like it's right there inside your bulletin):

*Wishing and dreaming of a better world means nothing if we don't realize that God gives us community to practice love and compassion. We cannot only care for ourselves, but we must also care about those around us, both near and far. Our gifts become part of a loving legacy in ways we can't foresee. Our gifts become blessings to people we don't know and blesses in ways we can't expect. We can make a difference beyond what we can imagine.*

The grain of wheat falling into the ground becomes a legacy, new life. We give it up. We give it away. We let go. We relinquish.

Thanks be to God. Amen.