**March 22, 2015 – 5th Sunday of Lent**

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This little interlude acts as a kind of prologue to Jesus’ farewell discourses of chapters 14 through 17. Chronologically, it sits between Jesus’ triumphant Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem and the last supper. With the exception of one sentence, this whole section appears only in the Gospel of John.

Scholars are vigorously debating, now, just as they were in the early days of the church, about whether the Gospel of John, with its many unique pieces, was a completely theological approach to telling Jesus’ story, or whether John had access to biographical information that was excluded from the other three. The cautious consensus is that all four Gospels are both biographical and theological in nature, so we’ll leave it at that, too.

The Gospel of John in general, and this passage in particular, can be mined for dozens of theological points – so many that it’s hard to pin them all down. But I want to focus on two ideas here: first, the image of a grain of wheat needing to die when it falls to the earth in order to bear fruit; and second, the idea of the ruler of this world being driven out of it.

Let’s start with the second. The word for world – *kosmos* – means a couple of things besides world. It can mean the inhabitants of the world, meaning us. It can mean the whole universe. Or it can mean worldly affairs or world order.

Charles Campbell, who is a preaching professor at Duke Divinity School, leans toward the last one and refers to it as The System. As he puts it:

*The “world” is a superhuman reality, concretely embodied in structures and institutions, that aggressively shapes human life and seeks to hold human beings captive to its ways.*

This reminds me of one of my favorite science fiction books of all time, Madeline L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time.* In this book, the protagonists battle an evil entity called IT, who has an entire planet in its clutches. On this planet, because it is completely controlled by IT, there is no crime, no hunger, and no poverty. However, for the same reason, there is also no individuality, no creativity, and no joy. People who might want to break away from IT’s control are rounded up and brought to a central processing facility to be “educated.”

It sometimes seems like our world is under a similar spell. Campbell points out three aspects of The System that has our society in its thrall; consumerism, domination, and violence.

Consumerism is obvious. We are consuming more and more every day, and taking more and more of the earth’s resources to do it. In our lifetimes, we have gone from our consumer items being well-made and expensive to cheap and shoddy. That means that instead of keeping things around and repairing them, and maybe passing them down to our children, we have become a throwaway society.

But we can’t seem to stop consuming, in part because we’re told that our worth depends upon the newest car, the hottest phone, or the latest in fashions or accessories. Which brings us to domination.

The idea here is that the world is a zero-sum game with winners and losers, and that we should want to be winners. Our structures and institutions are all built around this idea. Everything is a competition for the ever-diminishing resources that we, ourselves, are using up at record rates. And then this, in turn, leads to violence.

It used to be, as Carl von Clausewitz said, that war is a mere continuation of politics by other means. Now it’s the other way around - politics is a continuation of war by other means. Everywhere we look today there is violence. It permeates every part of our society – our language, our political discourse, our foreign relations, our entertainment, and even our religion. As Campbell says:

*…we see it in the death penalty, in acts of terrorism, and in nations’ responses to terrorism. Many of us have trouble even imagining alternatives to this myth—a grim signal of our captivity to it.*

The four horsemen of the apocalypse, mentioned in the book of Revelation, are traditionally called war, famine, pestilence, and death. But I think they had four brothers called consumerism, domination, violence, and last but not least, fear. These things, and especially fear, have us in a death grip that seems unbreakable.

But Jesus broke it. The Gospel of John is all about Jesus triumphing time after time over everything that had his people in its claws. Demons? Banished. Blindness? Cured. At the point of death? Up and about in no time. Actually dead? “Lazarus, come out!” Even scarcity is addressed time after time – from wine at a wedding to bread and fish for five thousand.

And then his final sign – the final miracle – is his own resurrection and ascension, which is what he’s referring to here. The ultimate breaking of the grip that The System has on the world is to use against the Romans the very instrument they used to inspire fear and keep control – the cross. The violence and brutality they committed against Jesus is turned by him into the ultimate glory of God. And this brings us back to the first theological point I wanted to talk about:

*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.*

This is obviously a reference both to the crucifixion and also a warning to the disciples about the cost of their discipleship. The second sentence of this passage is included in the other three Gospels, right after Jesus telling the disciples that they had to take up their cross and follow him. So that’s a given. But in the context of The System we’ve been talking about here, what does the grain of wheat dying look like?

It means dying to consumerism and all its insidious tentacles. Of course, that could mean merely buying less and making do with what we already have. It could mean concern for the environment. It could mean shutting off the incessant clamor of advertising and marketing and greed. And it could mean recognizing that God made each of us, and we are all beautiful in his sight even without makeup and perfume and expense clothes and nipping and tucking. Dying to consumerism is probably the least likely to cause our actual deaths. But I think it’s by far the hardest to cut out of our lives.

The grain of wheat dying means dying to domination in any number of ways. Turning our backs on competition is one, even it if means less money or prestige. Standing up against racism or intolerance is another, which could mean loss of friends or business. Also speaking truth to the powers that be in government or business to expose dishonesty or corruption, especially as it affects those among us who can’t speak up for themselves. It means facing down bullies, big and small.

And finally, it would seem that dying to violence is an oxymoron, and it would have been if that isn’t the path that Jesus, himself, took and would have us follow. Non-violent protest always exposes violence for what it really is – cowardice. But our very society is riddled with violence, from our entertainment to our politics to our foreign policy. It’s all about winning and saving face.

Jesus doesn’t care about saving face. He cares about us. He said, “I will draw all people to myself.” If we allow ourselves to be drawn to him, if our faces are turned toward him and toward the Cross, they won’t need saving because they will be saved with the rest of us.

And that salvation can’t be bought, sold, owned, competed for, or won in battle. It can only come from the source – Jesus Christ. As Lent winds its way inexorably to Holy Week and Good Friday, let’s think of the ways we can continually die to the world and loosen its grip on our lives. Not just on Sunday mornings, and not just during Lent, but every day of every year. I think we’ll be surprised at how much fruit we will bear.

Amen.