

The Fifth Sunday in Lent • March 29, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

John 12:20-33

“Blossoms”

Even though you might not be able to tell it from our weather from day to day, Spring has come to our nation's capital. We're starting to see some signs of it as the days grow longer and the birds chirp in the trees. One of the signs of Spring around St. John's is the annual return of a robin who likes to spend time in the tree that's just outside the entrance to our sanctuary. It seems like our robin is pretty territorial and likes to defend his turf. We know this because those of us that work in the church office hear him every day... as he bangs into the window right next to the tree in an attempt to scare off his reflection. But an even better-known sign of Spring in our region is the blooming of our cherry blossoms. This week ahead, in fact, is projected to be the best time for viewing the cherry blossoms downtown. People from all over are coming to Washington to take in the beauty of these pink and white flowers and to enjoy the annual National Cherry Blossom Festival down around the Tidal Basin. Many of you probably know that many of these trees came as a gift from the nation of Japan: 3,000 back in 1912 and another 3,800 in 1965. [Botanically speaking, the varieties of Japanese cherry trees that dominate the Tidal Basin are Yoshino and Kwanzan]. In Japan, these trees are known as sakura. There, sakura are not just a sign of the coming of Spring. To the Japanese, the cherry blossom represents the ephemeral nature of life: it blooms in glorious beauty but only remains for a short time before fading away. Even in the dawn of Spring, the cherry blossom hints at the eventuality of death.

In our gospel reading from John 12, Jesus knows that his season on earth is fleeting. The time has come for him to fulfill the purpose for which he born, and so he uses this opportunity to once again teach his disciples. Taking the illustration of a grain of wheat – which might seem a little foreign to our suburban hearing – Jesus directs his hearers toward the significance of his coming death. A seed exists for a particular purpose, a reason beyond itself. A seed is meant to serve as the vehicle for the birth of new life. Falling into the earth, it gives up its own life to fuel and nourish the life of a new plant. Even one seed might become a great harvest through its sacrifice, multiplying a hundredfold. Jesus is the one who came to earth to give up his life for the world. He is the one who dies so that the people might live.

Oddly enough, John never actually tells us what happens with those Greeks who came to see Jesus. But those Greeks, like you and me, are the people for whom Jesus would sacrifice himself on the cross. In our midweek Lenten services, we have been pondering the wounds of spirit that Jesus bore to and on the cross. We've been spending that time each week so that we can better understand what God did for those people and for us on the cross – what it meant for the Son of Man to be glorified. Reflecting on our our need for God's grace and his gift of life through Jesus, we begin to see why the tree of the cross does not need to be decked in blossoms to be a beautiful thing. But Jesus' doesn't limit his illustration of the seed to himself. He goes on to teach his disciples that dying to live is part of what it means to follow him.

Jesus' words may sound confusing to our ears: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life,” he says. But what does it mean to love one's life? Is this pointing to life in general, or something more specific? Isn't life a good thing and something that should be protected? We can turn to God's Word in 2 Timothy 3 for an answer. There, Paul writes: “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather

than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” Loving your own life means worshiping yourself, focusing on yourself and your own wants. It’s putting yourself before God – that’s the core of all sins. Jesus is laying out the result of self-centered behavior when he says that those who ever loves his life in this world loses it: such a life leads to one’s own spiritual destruction. We struggle with self-centered desires. Remember that robin that keeps flying into the window in the narthex? We’ve tried to shoo him off. We’ve even put up a picture of a hawk, one of its natural predators, in an effort to scare him away. But he keeps on coming back!..Like that territorial robin, we can become so focused on ourselves that we keep on banging into barriers and doing damage to ourselves.

So how is hating one’s own life in this world a good thing? Take a look at it from the same framework: if loving one’s own life is focusing on self, then hating it is self-denial. Jesus once explained it another way, saying, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” The person who practices such sacrifice of self, keeping himself from being the center of his own attention, dies to self. Talk of self-control and the voluntary setting-aside of our own desires can sound like foreign concepts in our day and age, kind of like this talk of grains of wheat. But Jesus instructs those who would follow him to do just that, to hate the desires of the present evil world so that they might keep hold on life eternal. This is life which does not end at the grave, life which connects us Christians with the same Jesus who gives it to us. God’s people are called to practice self-denial that yields a great benefit to the self. What great irony!

For those who follow Jesus, self-denial in this life isn’t an effort to set up a vacuum, an absence of focus. It’s a re-focusing on Christ. There are consequences to being a Christ-follower: we die to the life of this world. In 1 Peter 2, we hear that Jesus “bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” A seed that sits in a packet on a shelf does nothing but collect dust, but one that is planted and gives up its life will blossom. When your attention is turned to Jesus, your life becomes an opportunity to act in loving service to our Lord through service to the world around you. You become a blossom on the Tree of Life.

Spring is here. In the week ahead – and especially if you head down to the Tidal Basin – take a look at the cherry blossoms that are coming into full bloom. The sakura is a beautiful tree with its pink and white blossoms spreading out in clusters, like puffy clouds. But the blossoms, though beautiful, pass away in only a short time. When you look on that beauty, think of Jesus, the Son of God gave himself so that you might have life, life focused on God, life which does not end

Amen.