

“DYING TO LIVE”

John 12:20-33

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1822. In her 20's, she successfully escaped from slavery. Rather remarkably, Harriet Tubman returned on thirteen occasions to lead approximately seventy friends and family members to also find freedom. What amazes me about this woman is her courage in not playing it safe, but risking her life in repeatedly returning to lead others to freedom. When asked about the source of her courage, Ms Tubman would recount an experience she had when she was thirteen years old when an angry white overseer threw a two pound weight at another enslaved person who was attempting to flee. The weight accidentally struck Tubman in the head and cracked her skull. The slave girl lingered near death for days without medical care. While for the rest of her life Harriet Tubman suffered severe headaches, blackouts and seizures, that blow also, in a sense, was her liberation. As she noted, *“I almost died once, I had nothing to lose.”*

A couple more similar accounts. In Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago, which traces the history of the forced labor camps which existed in the Soviet Union during the first part of the twentieth century, the hero is able to endure the deplorable conditions of imprisonment by determining from the outset that he is dead. In watching the prisoners and their treatment, the main character observes that those who are first to collapse under the strain of imprisonment are those who fail to accept their fate, while those who make it through are those who live as though they have already died. Likewise, James Jones, a war novelist, is the author of From Here to Eternity, a novel which was made into a movie, which focuses on several members of the U. S. army stationed in Hawaii in the months leading up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Shortly before his death, James Jones was asked how in the middle of the horrors of war are soldiers able to keep going. What enables them to fight with seemingly no fear? Jones answers that in the midst of the horrors of war soldiers must decide that they have already died, which ironically enables the warriors to live.

One more similar story is the one we heard a few moments ago in the scripture reading. According to John's gospel, here we find Jesus in Jerusalem during the Jewish Passover. In fact, the verses immediately preceding the ones we heard record John's account of Jesus' entrance into

Jerusalem as he rides on a donkey through the crowd which lines the street, waving palm branches and shouting their praise of God. The verses we are looking at this morning probably occurred on the following Tuesday, just a few days before Jesus' death on the cross. We are told that some Gentiles—Greeks by nationality—are in town for the Passover. We presume they are converts to Judaism since they have traveled to the Holy City at the time of this special festival. The Greeks have heard of Jesus and want to meet him. We have no indication whether their interest is mere curiosity or sincere reverence. They make their desire known to Philip, one of Jesus' disciples. They may have chosen Philip because he has a Greek name and comes from the Greek speaking town of Bethsaida. Philip consults with Andrew, another of the Jesus' chosen twelve who is from the same hometown as Philip. The two of them share this request with Jesus.

The scripture does not tell us if the Greeks got their desire to meet Jesus fulfilled, but we do have a record of Jesus' curious response to the request to see him. Jesus does not answer this request directly, but instead recounts a short parable—a story which uses an agricultural analogy. In verse 24, Jesus notes, *“A grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. But if it does die, it produces many grains.”* This is one of the curious phenomena of nature. I hold in my hand a variety of seeds. They have hard surfaces and give the appearance of being dead. As long as I keep these seeds safe in my hand or on a shelf in the garage or contained in a jar, they will remain just single seeds and nothing more. In order for these seeds to do what seeds are meant to do, they have to be buried in the ground as if put in a grave, where they sit in the dark until their time comes. Then when the ground becomes warm and moist, the seeds begin to swell and crack, putting down roots and sending up a shoot which grows toward the sun until it breaks through the surface of the soil. Life emerges, but only after the seed has given up its life. As Jesus notes, only when the seed dies does it multiply and produce more grain.

Commentators suggest that on one level, Jesus offers this analogy to give his listeners a glimpse of the meaning of his own death on the cross. While traveling from Galilee, Jesus had told his disciples that he was going to the Holy City to die. Jesus could see that the sentiment in Jerusalem was turning against him and that he would not get out of town alive. In fact, John's gospel goes on to record Jesus speaking of his own death in verse 27. Yet, we know there is a

happy ending to this tragic story. Three days after his crucifixion Jesus is resurrected, life follows death.

The passage we are looking at this morning suggests a second meaning for the analogy of a seed needing to die before sprouting to new life. Jesus goes on to suggest this imagery does not just apply to his needing to give his life on the cross in order to be resurrected, but that the principle applies to our lives as well. Jesus notes, as he does on five other occasions recorded in the gospels, *“Whoever tries to gain one’s life will lose it, but whoever loses one’s life for my sake will gain it”* (vs. 25-26). Jesus reminds us that as is true in nature in which a seed must die in order to produce life, we experience the fullness of life only when we are willing to give up ourselves. To hold on to life too tightly by thinking always of our physical safety and personal advantage is to lose real life because we lose sight of God. On the other hand, those who serve God at the cost of personal privilege and willingly sacrifice selfish interests are promised eternal life. Only in giving up one’s life by dying to self-centeredness, self-sufficiency and self-protection can one experience an abundant life.

Victor Frankl became a world-renowned neurologist, psychiatrist and author in Vienna, Austria. During World War II, as a Jew he was arrested by the Nazis and sent to the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp. There he received brutal treatment—beatings, hunger and freezing cold. Upon arriving at the concentration camp, he was stripped of everything—property, possessions and family. His wife, children and parents were all killed during the Holocaust. The Gestapo forced Frankl to strip and stand before them totally naked. They noticed that he was still wearing his wedding band. As they removed even that from him, Frankl thought to himself, *“You can take away my wife, you can make away my children, you can strip me of my clothes and my freedom, but there is one thing no person can ever take away from me—and that is my freedom to choose how I shall react to what happens to me.”*

A major loss for Frankl when he arrived at Auschwitz was the unpublished manuscript of his book which he had hidden in the lining of his coat. He had spent years researching and writing a book on developing a psychiatric theory regarding finding meaning in life. At Auschwitz the guards took his coat and thus he lost the product of his years of labor. After being released from Auschwitz, Frankl rewrote his book and published it under the title, Man’s Search

for Meaning. The rewritten version included recounting stories of his experiences from his time in the concentration camp. Frankl describes one group of persons who had lost all hope and would refuse to get up and leave their hut for work in the morning. They would prefer to simply lie on the floor in their own filth, and no amount of beatings or persuasion would get them to move. They would begin to sleep through meals, work detail and exercises and eventually slip to their deaths. A second group of persons were those who took an interest in others by walking through the huts, comforting others and even giving away their last piece of bread. These were persons who did not just become the victims of their circumstances, but took charge of their lives by reaching out to others at the cost of losing their own comfort and wellbeing. Again, Frankl writes in his book, *“Everything can be taken from a person but one thing—the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances. There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge there is something to live for, to find meaning in one’s life. . . Persons who have a “why” to live can bear almost any “how.”*

Do you remember how our scripture text began this morning? It began with the request of some Greeks to meet Jesus. Jesus’ reply in learning of this inquiry seems strange when he responds by talking about a seed needing to die in order to be productive. A theme which Jesus repeats in the gospel accounts is that we first must die to ourselves before we can experience the fullness of life. We die when we let go of our animosities, negative attitudes, selfishness and self-protection. Jesus’ response to the inquiry of the Greeks at first appears strange, but is actually insightful because it reminds us of the lesson learned from a seed, which is that **the seed must first die in the ground in order to live and be productive. Likewise, in order for us to find the abundance of life in our relationship with God, we must die to ourselves.**

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