

THE GOOD SEED
John 12:20-26
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Last week I got my hair cut. While waiting for the next available barber I went through the magazine rack only to find old copies of People Magazine mostly filled with stories of today's "in celebrities" like Madonna, who has far outlasted her fifteen minutes of fame, and a host of others who apparently are the most important people on the planet.

Why are these publications so popular? Because many of us are curious and vicariously enjoy living through our favorite movie stars and recording artists. Then there are others who may not buy celebrity centered magazines but given the chance in a waiting room or a long line at the supermarket checkout counter we will browse through them because we enjoy feeling kind of smug if not superior especially when you read about someone like Madonna giving her latest pronouncements on the affairs of the world. That's when you can shake your head and say, "There but for the grace of God goes God."

I confess my smug attitude is far from Christian and I need to be reminded that celebrities are watched over and loved by God as much as I am. But then I think about how hard it must be being a celebrity, especially those young and impressionable celebrities who are constantly surrounded by paid sycophants telling them how wonderful they are not to mention the intense pressure they're always under to keep their tenuous hold on fame as long as possible in such a competitive industry.

Having said that there's a lot to be said for not being rich and famous but that doesn't mean the rest of us are immune from the same temptations, frustrations and pressure celebrities face every day. The problems we face may be different in scope and scale but aren't we tempted by the same alluring messages that bombard them, that success is everything and being the center of attention is essential for having a happy and fulfilling life?

But is that really what life is all about? Certainly not.

A man was talking with a friend about attending the funeral of a coworker who was about his age. He said he didn't know the man well but they got along and had lunch together from time to time. The deceased even had kids the same age as his own. Then, without warning he dropped dead. All during the funeral the man kept thinking, "That could've been me."

That night he hardly slept. He couldn't get what happened out of his mind.

"Shouldn't life be more than this?" he asked his friend.

Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit." (John 12:24)

On first hearing this you may think it sounds pretty bleak. And yet, this apparently negative saying is filled with hope. Jesus was reminding his listeners, who lived in an agrarian society, that a seed of grain remains lifeless and unproductive until it is planted in rich soil. Only then will the seed die or germinate and finally raise up a new blade of wheat. So this dying seed is an apt metaphor for the disciple's lifestyle, letting the old self die so the new self can emerge from the old.

Jesus continued, "Those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (John 12:26) What did Jesus mean by that?

In a nutshell Jesus is speaking truth: the way of the world is trumped by the way of God's Kingdom. In fact the values and priorities of the world system are in direct contradiction to the values and priorities Jesus of the kingdom of God. So these same values and priorities need to be put to death before we can really start living to the fullest. In other words what the world teaches us about what's really important needs to be turned on its head.

Here's an example of what I mean. Can you imagine People or Us Magazine flying off the racks of your local supermarket if instead of articles and pictures of the rich and famous there were instead stories and pictures of people you never heard about because they quietly and selflessly make important contributions in the places where they live? Instead of stories about who's dating who or who broke up with who stories we'd now learn about ordinary people doing extraordinary things like medical doctors who take time from thriving practices to work in inner city clinics or business people who give their valuable time to mentor and empower young men and women from the inner city so they can break the cycle of poverty and crime in this generation. How about instead of feature stories of celebrity multimillion dollar wedding receptions there be stories about regular people giving not only their hard earned money but also their free time to work in soup kitchens or visiting the elderly or those in prison?

Of course this would probably never happen because People and Us Magazine would soon be out of business. Who'd waste five dollars to read about a bunch of do gooders when you can fantasize what it's like to be Justin Beber or Kim Kardashian?

This prevailing mindset in the culture explains why Jesus started becoming so unpopular towards the end of his ministry. He began with a bang having huge crowds following him and listening to everything he said. But then things started to turn as he became more focused on his crucifixion and began emphasizing the cost of discipleship especially all that talk about hating the things of this world and losing your life for the sake of the Gospel. If you read the four carefully you even get the sense that Jesus from that point on had no time for anyone who wasn't ready to drop everything and follow him to his cross.

Remember the story when a man told Jesus he would follow wherever he went. Jesus warned him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air their nests but the Son of man has no place to lay his head." Apparently Jesus sensed this guy's sudden burst of enthusiasm would soon dissipate when he realized he got more than he bargained for when he promised to follow Jesus.

Then there was the man who vowed to follow Jesus but first he had to bury his father. This time Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their dead but as for you go and proclaim everywhere the Kingdom of God." This may sound harsh and unfeeling until you learn that phrase "I must first bury my father" doesn't mean his father just died. Rather it's a phrase or idiom for, "I have family obligations so I have to first take care of business."

In both cases Jesus responded by basically saying we need to reset our priorities in order to put God's Kingdom first, on top of your list only then will everything else fall into place.

Remember how this morning's passage began? Some Greeks sought out the disciple Phillip saying, "Sir we wish to see Jesus."

Greeks were notorious for loving to chat about newest ideas, especially the latest philosophy that was currently all the rage. They'd talk and talk until they exhausted the subject and then move on to the next subject. Knowing this may explain why Jesus wasn't at all flattered when he was told these Greeks requested an audience with him. It's likely he sensed as far as they were concerned he was just a curiosity, the latest celebrity philosophers who enjoyed being a sparring partner in the arena of new ideas.

But Jesus wasn't interested. Only hours away from the cross he didn't have time for idle, scintillating conversations. Instead never even acknowledging the Greeks' request, Jesus replied to Phillip, "...unless a grain of mustard seed falls to the earth and dies it remains a single grain... Those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

Basically Jesus was saying too much preoccupation in trivial pursuits will eventually lead to a dead end. The unfortunate truth is you can base your life pursuing the things of this world and end up spiritually bankrupt and lonely. On the other hand if you allow your old self to die with Jesus you are promised you will be raised up with Jesus, not for your glory but for God's because you set aside your security and ego agenda so you can begin to live for God and others.

Listen once more to Jesus' answer to Phillip, "...unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains a single grain but if it dies it bears much fruit."

In other words when you cooperate with God and allow God to put to death any desire or ambition that compromises your call to be raised up through Christ, God will replace your desire to indulge in the things of this world with the new desire to live according to the way of

the Kingdom by being more generous and loving as you sacrifice yourself for the greater good. This doesn't mean you have to give up your day job, sell all your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor but it does mean you stop thinking that all your gifts and talents really don't belong to you to use as you want. Now you can see the bigger picture and come to realize everything about you ultimately belongs to God which if you are a Christian motivates you to spend your life wisely through your discipleship.

Jesus concluded by saying, "Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am there my servant will be also. Whoever serves me the Father will honor." (John 12:26)

Keep in mind Jesus said these things just hours before he set into motion the events leading up to his death on Good Friday. Perhaps remembering this will add to the same sense of urgency Jesus experienced during his last days that we do well to recognize.

Remember the man who was shaken to the bone by the death of his coworker. He said to his friend, "They've already replaced him at the office... Two weeks ago he was sitting not fifty feet from me and now he's gone like he never existed. Shouldn't a man's life be more than that?"

One hundred years from now most of us will be dead and long forgotten except by God who never forgets those who spend their lives loving and serving Christ by loving God by serving others. Maybe People Magazine records all comings and goings of the rich and famous but be assured, the Lamb's Book of Life records all the deeds of kindness and acts of love rendered by those who put flesh on the Sermon on the Mount by letting go of their addiction to the things of this world and allowing themselves instead to be embraced by God's everlasting arms.

Will our stories be included?