

Luke 6:27-38

6:27 "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
6:28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.
6:29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.
6:30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.
6:31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.
6:32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.
6:33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.
6:34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.
6:35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.
6:36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.
6:37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;
6:38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

15:35 But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"
15:36 Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.
15:37 And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.
15:38 But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.
15:42 So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.
15:43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.
15:44 It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.
15:45 Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

15:46 But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual.

15:47 The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.

15:48 As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven.

15:49 Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

15:50 What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

SERMON

I have a very close relationship with wheat. So much so that I have it literally tattooed on my body. I love it for so many of the reasons you all can guess. I mean, there's the obvious and very pastoral reason—that communion relies on the centrality of bread, and my most fundamental understanding of bread as a good westerner begins with wheat. So, I love the religious, spiritual, and liturgical place of wheat. But also, like, I love wheat for far more basic reasons. I mean, I love bread. To the point that it's unhealthy. You can ask John, I'd literally only eat bread if it were nutrition enough to sustain my body. I love baking bread...and cakes and cookies and pies and all the rest...and most of what I bake comes from wheat based flours. And, beyond my eating and hobby habits, I grew up in the middle of a bunch of wheat fields. Not literally, I'm a city girl, but the moment you drive out of Spokane in any direction you hit the Palouse, and it's all wheat all the time. Except when it's grapes, but that's another conversation for another time.

I love wheat. I love the way the stalks look, I love the feel of the seed kernels as I run my hand through a big pile of them. I love all grades and varieties of wheat flours, from the nutty oily whole grain to the powdery white pastry variety. It's one of the few crops I don't think I'll ever take for granted, because it's physically, locationally, and spiritually foundational to my sense of being and self. I am not me without wheat.

And so I have some affinity for today's scripture. Not that I'm claiming to understand it, but just that I sort of dig the imagery. Paul's continuing his argument from last week, all about bodily resurrection from the dead, and as he continues he goes on this tangent about wheat. His image is simple: a wheat seed is plain, it's small, humble, and easily overlooked. But you plant that seed in the ground, and even though it seems to disappear, in time it sprouts up into this glorious plant. A green stalk with sharp little fronds and a head full of grain, drying out to take its place in the rolling, amber fields. The seed looks nothing like the beautiful, mature stalk. And in Paul's imagination this little seed is like our physical bodies, planted in death, it's literally a burial metaphor here. The seed, our bodies, are buried in the ground in death, only to rise again, growing out into something new and beautiful and majestic and so much more than we could imagine—these beautiful stalks of our spiritual selves.

But like all metaphors, this one isn't perfect, right? I mean, to begin with, seeds don't actually die when they're planted. Seeds may transmute and change form, but the sweet

little seed lives on through this process of growth and change. But, let's give Paul this one. It was 2000 years ago, and we've learned a thing or two about angiosperms since the first century.

And then there's the classic quibble with any of our good Greek writers. The body-spirit dualism they loved so much. Paul struggles to escape it at times, but it's always there, this nagging sense that our bodies are dusty and earthy and somehow less than the glorious, god given, and higher level spirits which constitute our "real selves." We've talked about this before and I'll remind you once again—this dualism is the unhealthy edge of the New Testament. And if we claim to be made in the image of God, then that means our whole selves—our height and weight and skin color and lumpy parts and strong muscles and all the rest. We should be cautious, always, to hold the body and the spirit together, as equal, valuable, and important parts of God's good creation.

But, those concerns aside, Paul's making a really interesting, kind of hard to hear point in this passage. Paul's doubling down on death, which feels like a counterintuitive argument for a pastor so hell bent on convincing his folks to believe in a bodily resurrection. Paul's really committed to the belief that death is a necessary part of the human life cycle, that it's inevitable, sure, but more than that, it's necessary. He talks about this in one of his other letters, where he says that we all follow the pattern of Jesus—that we live and have these beautiful lives, but that we are then created, in a sense, to follow Jesus into a death like his, with the grand hope that out of death we follow Christ into the resurrection. In the image of this letter to the Corinthians, Paul would say that Jesus was a seed just like us. Our little seed bodies are humble and transitory, and they die. But that in that death, we grow into something new and more beautiful than before.

I think death has been close to the surface for a lot of us this week, especially as we've marked the death of Alison Henderson, who was beloved in this community. Some of us live in this space of death, with family members who are sick, our own personal ailments, or merely by dint of the work that some of us do as pastors, as doctors, as nurses, as caregivers. I was struck how close I live to death this week, and how distant this is for some, when I was out at the Edgefield with my friend Sara, who's a Lutheran Pastor. We were getting pedicures for her birthday, and having an extended conversation about new laws being considered in Oregon regarding the disposal of human remains. Oregon is considering new legislation concerning green burial, which is the composting of human bodies, and aquamation, which is an alternative to cremation. She and I were just having a merry old time, discussing death, when the woman doing Sara's nails very politely asked that we please change the topic of conversation, because we were creeping her out.

Apparently normal folks don't talk about burial technology when out for birthday spa days. Who knew?

It was funny, but it also reminded me of something I really value in the church. I am so grateful for a place, among my friends and the people who know me so well, where death is not a taboo. I am so appreciative of a space where we can be honest about the fullness of

human life, including death, and while it might be hard, it's not creepy or weird for us to discuss.

And I wonder as I read this letter to the church in Corinth, if this is part of what Paul might have been getting at. That to understand, believe in, and place our hope on the resurrection, we first need to become friends with death. We need to make it a thing we can talk about, contemplate, plan for, argue about, and laugh about over pedicures. It's a gift of religious communities when we do this work together. And it's a gift of scripture that we're given permission and metaphor and questions to ask.

Death is as inevitable in human life as taxes, or however that saying goes. And so let's talk about it. That's my encouragement for you this week, to be like Paul, and face death head on. Let's imagine what it means to lose these bodies, to say goodbye to those we love. Let's talk about plans. How do you want to be buried? What hymns would you like at your memorial? What fears does death bring to your mind? And what's comforting to you when you consider death? And, in all of this, let us not overlook the promise of Christ, that we do not remain dead in the ground, but instead, like those little seeds, grow into new life, far larger and more beautiful and complex than we might have ever imagined.

Amen.