

**The Fifth Sunday in Lent,
March 21, 2021
Lenten Lessons from the Garden
Part Five: “Acorns and Oak Trees”
“The Spiritual Practice of Dying Before you Die”
A Sermon Based on John 12:20-26
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin**



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This week's lectionary Gospel lesson coincides beautifully with our sermon series on "Lenten Lessons from the Garden." Listen to these words from John 12:20-26 (NRSV):

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 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. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

It's Passover time in Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands of people are gathered from all over the world. The disciples approach Jesus, incredibly excited because some Greeks wanted to meet him. Up until now Jesus had shared his ideas mainly with the Jews. The Greeks were known to be open-minded seekers after the truth, interested in new ideas. Jesus might easily find a receptive audience among them. We would think that Jesus would have said "Absolutely! I can't wait to meet them!" But Jesus is obviously preoccupied with the events that are about to take place in his life. His death on a cross is only six days away. As the crowd gathers around him, Jesus utters the following words, which must have sounded strange to those who were encountering him for the first time: ***"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."*** (Jn 12:23-24) Here Jesus is not only referring to his own upcoming death in which he must die on the cross, and rise again after three days. He is also referring to all of us.

What is this talk about wheat falling to the ground and dying all about? What is this stuff about seeds? I call what Jesus is talking about "Acornology" and this "Acornology" goes against what our modern society teaches. Yet gardeners so easily understand Jesus' metaphor. Let me try to get at what Jesus is hinting to by reading a story by Cynthia Bourgeault, which goes like this:

"Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There

were seminars called “Getting All You Can out of Your Shell.” There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped ‘out of the blue’ by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, “We ... are ... that!”

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: “So, tell us, how would we become that tree?” “Well,” he said, pointing upward, “it has something to do with going into the ground ... and cracking open the shell.” “Insane,” they responded. “Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore.” (*The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, pp. 64-65.)

This story is about acorns not understanding that they really and truly are oak trees. This is what Jesus is talking about when he says that “**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**” (Jn 12:24). Jesus is saying to us: You are so much more than you think you are. You think you are an acorn. You do everything you can to protect your image of yourself as an acorn. You are so preoccupied with yourselves, your happiness, your success, being in control, other people’s expectations of you, that you fail to realize that you can be so much more. You don’t have to remain an acorn. You actually are a magnificent, great, strong, beautiful oak tree. That is your destiny! That is your calling! That is your purpose in life!

How do you transition from being an acorn to being an oak tree? How can you make the move from being a single kernel of wheat to going on to produce a harvest of fruit? Well, here comes the confusing part. To become an oak tree you have to let go of your acorn. The acorn and kernel of wheat must fall into the ground and be broken open so that life in its fullness can emerge. When our outward shell is broken open, suddenly an inner quality of aliveness emerges. When the outward shell of our clinging ego is broken open, we are suddenly freed to truly begin the exciting adventure toward becoming all that God calls us to be. But we have to give up the acorn to become an oak tree.

The Lenten journey toward becoming all that we are created to be involves a surrender to God that is also a dying of our false self. Yes, there is sacrifice involved. We don’t like the word sacrifice do we? But those of you who studied Latin might remember that the

word *sacrifice* is from a Latin root that means “make holy” or “make whole.” We sacrifice our lesser selves to become whole or holy. We die to our false selves, our egos, so that we might become fully alive in God. The great mystical poet Rumi explains to us that “The Mystery of ‘Die before you Die’ is this: that the gifts come after your dying and not before.” We let the acorn fall so that we might become an oak tree. Our scripture today speaks to this great mystery of the Christian faith that we must “die before you die” when Jesus says that ***“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. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life”*** (John 12:24-25). We find something similar in Luke’s Gospel when Jesus says: ***“Whoever would save his life shall lose it, and whoever shall lose his life for my sake will save it”*** (Luke 9:24). Later, in John’s Gospel, Jesus depicts God as the great gardener, who sometimes needs to bring pruning shears to us, when he told his disciples that: ***“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit”*** (Jn 15:1-2).

Jesus, of course, modeled these teachings by his willingness to surrender his life and die on the cross on our behalf. And we too are also called to an archetypal soul gesture of surrender, of dying before we die. In her acclaimed recent book *Wintering*, Katherine May describes how on the cusp between fall and winter, deciduous trees are called to drop their leaves in a process that is called abscission (p. 69). A process of surrender is going on. Those of us who watch this happen may only see death. Yet deep within this dropping of the leaves, this abscission, new life is secretly, silently, relentlessly emerging. Albert Camus described this process when he wrote that *“In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”* Likewise, as we surrender those parts of ourselves that need pruning, as the egos of our false selves are allowed to die in the winter seasons of our lives, we are freed to become the person whom God has called us to be. The dropping and breaking open of the acorn allows for the growth of an oak tree. As Natalie Sleeth beautifully put it in these words in the first verse of her hymn:

*In the bulb there is a flower;
in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise:
butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter
there's a spring that waits to be,*

*unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.*

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Jesus said: ***“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”*** (Jn 12:24). This is a great spiritual mystery that is repeated in numerous places in scripture and in the perennial philosophy. God’s garden requires a cycle of death and rebirth, over and over again, not just in the natural world but also in our souls so that new life might emerge. Since mysteries can only be hinted at, not rationally explained, I would like to share a story, again by Cynthia Bourgeault, that points to the essence of this scripture:

“Long ago, back in Maine, I worked for a small marine publishing company, where I had the pleasure of editing A Cruising Guide to the Maine Coast by a man named Hank Taft. When I met him, Hank was one of those exuberant, restless souls, sixty-one going on thirty, filled with life and passion. ... He bounced around in a variety of careers, from business executive to president of Outward Bound. He’d rowed the entire Maine coast in a twelve-foot Peapod and was now making a fine debut as an author and a cruising sailor.

“Stunned” was the response of virtually everyone who knew him when we learned that Hank had contracted pancreatic cancer. And Hank himself was no less stunned, but he quickly regrouped. Characteristically, his first response was to give it the “old Yale try,” taking command of his treatment program with the same panache as if planning a transatlantic cruise. The pieces involved an eclectic blend of physical workouts, diet, light chemotherapy, and—new to a staunch rationalist like Hank—visualization meditation for an hour each evening.

I remember the day very clearly: February 4, 1991. The sun was just rising over the islands of Penobscot Bay, and Hank’s wife Jan had cooked us a hearty lumberjack’s breakfast. As we sat overlooking the cold, brilliant ocean partly obscured in winter sea smoke, conversation came around to the topic of Hank’s plans for the upcoming sailing season. Somehow we got from there onto the subject of fog, and we all shared our uneasiness about making passages in zero-visibility conditions.

“But there’s a lot of ways to keep busy so you don’t feel the fear,” Hank observed cheerfully. “You can keep precise time checks and enter them in the log. You can stand

out on the bow and every minute do a 360-degree scan of the waters. You can watch for changes in ripple patterns and identify passing lobster buoys....”

“Yes,” I said—and then, volunteering some of my own work-in-progress on the subject of fog passages, “or else you can just let the fear come up and fall through it to the other side”

He looked at me as if I’d just pierced him with a sword. How I wished those words had never been spoken!

Over the next few weeks Hank became decidedly more inward. He quickly gave up the visualization and the lumberjack breakfasts, then the workouts and chemotherapy. He gathered his family, made his final reconciliations, settled his affairs, and waited. It did not prove to be a long wait. Within three weeks the rapidly spreading cancer had obstructed his lower intestine, and he faced the choice of eking out a few more weeks of life in a hospital or dying at home. Wholeheartedly he chose the latter.

Hank had never been a religious man (in fact, he held religion primarily responsible for the bigotry and violence in the world), but in those final weeks a change so extraordinary came over him that none of us could fail to notice it. As his physical body withered, his soul grew large and luminous. Friends gathered by his bedside could feel the energy of love radiating from him almost as a force field. He faced his death with open heart, utterly trusting and utterly serene.

Three days before the end, I went for what was to be my last visit. Hank was curled in bed, his body totally broken yet somehow radiantly powerful. We hugged each other and said farewell. And then his last words to me—so muffled and unexpected that I did not at first catch them: “Are you fearless yet?”

“Not yet, Hank,” I said, “I’m trying.”

“Fall ... fearless ... into ... love.”

In those final mumbled words, [“Fall ... fearless ... into ... love”] Hank conveyed more to me of the essence of who he was and what life was than could have been done in a lifetime of spiritual teaching. Although it would take me another ten years to understand what I had heard in that moment, in a deep sense I had recognized it already—because, as I said earlier, it is the archetypal soul gesture. From a force greater than our own lives, we are made for this, and when we finally yield ourselves into

it, we are born into a meaning that is never known as we simply struggle on the surface with our acorn reality.” (Cynthia Bourgeault, The Wisdom Way of Knowing, 69-71)

That is how the acorn becomes an oak tree. This is how we “die before we die.” That is the meaning behind Jesus saying that **“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”** (Jn 12:24).

In this lifetime, before our actual physical death, we can surrender ourselves to God.

We can “fall fearless into love.”

We “fall fearless into that which is pure love.”

We “fall fearless into the pure love that is God.”

We “fall fearless into God.”

That is how an acorn becomes an oak tree.

And that is what Natalie Sleeth tried to express in the final verse of her song when she wrote of the greatest spiritual mystery of all that occurs when we find ourselves at the cusp of time and eternity that Jesus before us courageously faced on the cross:

*In our end is our beginning;
in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing;
in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection;
at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.*

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Closing Prayer: Loving God, just as Jesus surrendered and gave up his life on the cross, we too are called to surrender our false selves, our egos to you as we die to self, falling fearlessly into you, so that we might not just remain a single grain of wheat, not just an acorn, but an oak tree, bearing fruit through loving service in your world. Amen.