

First Presbyterian Church
John 12:20-33, “Unless a Seed Falls”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/17/2024

Anyone who has made a commitment to exercise
but wasn't sure it was worth all the soreness and discomfort
has heard the phrase, “no pain, no gain.”

And if you're going through a tough time in life,
you might have an annoying friend who always tries
to make things feel better who told you,
“After every storm, there's a rainbow.”

And if you have heard someone describe the sometimes messy path
to economic growth you've probably heard it said,
“You can't make an omelet if you don't break a few eggs.”

But could it be that Jesus said it first?
There's a pattern to these sayings that I also see
emerge in the passage I read from John 12.

The pattern begins with something we ordinarily perceive as negative
and then connects that to something we would all see as positive.

This simple pattern is a hallmark of Jesus' teaching and of Jesus' lifestyle.

But just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy.
Let's try our hand at creating some examples!
(Ask for negative experiences and positive outcomes)
For every _____ there's _____.
If you _____ you'll also receive _____.

Maybe we should look at how Jesus did it.

The setting is Jerusalem, the week before Passover.

People are gathering from many countries and regions,
including some Greeks who find Phillip.
Word had spread of the miracles Jesus had done,
and so the Greeks say to Phillip, “We would like to see Jesus!”

It seems like a simple request to fulfill.
But when Jesus hears it, he recognizes that they might be looking
for a popular miracle worker rather than
a man whose destiny would take him to a Roman cross.

He says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

That sounds great! These Greek travelers are in luck –
they will get to see the glory of God on display in Jesus!

Jesus reveals his unique pattern of glorification in three different ways:

First, through the wheat seed:
“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.”

Second, through a person’s attitude toward their life:
If you “love” your life, you’ll lost it.
But if you “Hate” your life, you will keep it for eternity.

(I’m sorry ... Jesus wants us to hate our life?)

Third, through a person’s loyalty:
If you follow and serve Jesus (rather than an earthly authority or power),
you will be honored by Jesus’ Father in heaven.

The pattern is simple, and we see the wisdom of Jesus reflected in
many proverbs of our own age.
But living into it is anything but easy.

I am regularly reminded by how compelled I am to seek comfort.
I want to feel good.
If I don’t feel good, I do whatever I can to remedy that.
Now, I’ve learned by experience that some of the
readily available “feel good” solutions are double edged sword.

Junk food, beer, mindless entertainment, ogling people on the internet,
arguing with people on the internet, playing video games or card games,
these things can make a person feel good ... but as a lifestyle,
they lead toward a pit.

You might be more sophisticated than me, so you may have progressed
to more elevated feel good pursuits: good grades, career achievements,
the perfect garden, a well manicured lawn,
a pristine car inside and out, the perfect house ...
the perfect family. What's not to love?

Nothing! You love it all. In fact you might love it so, so much
that you become completely identified with it. You love your life so much
that you joke to your friends, "I love my life to death."

Interestingly, that's what Jesus said:

***"Those who love their life will lose it. But those who hate their life
in this world will keep it for eternal life."***

Hate their life? What a strange phrase.

Dale Bruner suggests this substitution for "those who what their life"
in our current context:

"the person who dies to the supremacy of his or her own self-preservation
and advancement at all costs."

A few weeks ago we heard Jesus say that

if we seek to save our lives we will lose them,
but if we lose them for his sake we will save them.

Today we hear that if we love our life we will lose it,

but if we hate our life *in this world* we will keep it for eternity? Yes. It's true.

Deeply so. Examples abound.

Oh, I could tell you of Ghandi and Mother Theresa

and Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu.

They are shining examples of Jesus' wisdom
put on display in real life.

But you've heard their stories and repeating them is tiresome.

What about **Wangari Maathai**? Do you know about her?

Wangari Maathai was a Kenyan environmentalist, and political activist.

Born in 1940, she was educated in Catholic schools
run by British missionaries.

Missionaries taught literacy while colonizers brought Western political influence.

According to Brooke Bader,

“Prior to colonization, [Kenyans] would collectively
plant and harvest food, but colonists used the land for cash crops,
destroying the traditional farming, forests and water towers,
prompting soil erosion, pollution
and the loss of biological diversity.

The government cleared the land and the natural forests to make way
for commercial plantations. Local plants and animals,
the whole ecosystem, was destroyed.”

In this context, Wangari left Kenya and studied biology at Mount St. Scholastica
in Duluth, Minnesota in 1964.

(Can you imagine? I’ve been to Duluth,
and there aren’t a lot of Kenyans.)

She later received her Masters degree at the University of Pittsburgh.

Then in 1971 she completed her education at the University of Nairobi
and became the first woman in East or Central Africa
to earn a doctorate.

When Wangari returned to Kenya, she encountered a multilayered
intersection of issues:

environmental issues like systemic deforestation,
human rights and feminist concerns, as well as corruption
in national governance.

So Wangari began gathering women together...to plant trees.

They called themselves the Green Belt Movement.

She worked tirelessly and was fiercely committed to her cause.

She was so committed her husband eventually divorced her.

No-fault divorce was not allowed, so he declared that she was,
“too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control!”
(He might have been jealous of her characteristics?)

As the Green Belt Movement worked to restore ecosystems,
Wangari told people stories of African history
and the pain that colonization had brought.
When the government threatened to destroy forest land,
the Green Belt women protested peacefully by singing and dancing.
But Wangari was repeatedly beaten and imprisoned.

A woman as brilliant and charismatic as Wangari Maathai
could have “loved her life,” gone along with the powers of her time,
found comfortable positions at universities,
and kept many good things for herself.
Instead, she “hated her life” (using John’s strange sounding phrase),
though she profoundly loved what she was doing.

She gave her life away to others, to women, and to the land itself
through the surprisingly radical act of planting trees.

In 2004, Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize
for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy, and peace.
She was the first African woman to receive this honor.

Unless a wheat seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed.

Another person whose story emulates Jesus’ pattern is James Harrison.

He is also known as the “Man with the Golden Arm.”

Harrison is an Australian blood plasma donor.

But his plasma is not ordinary blood plasma:

it contains a rare antibody known as anti-D immunoglobulin,
which is used to create a medication that is crucial for preventing
hemolytic disease of the newborn (HDN).

HDN is condition that can be fatal to babies born to Rh-negative mothers.

Born in 1936, Harrison began donating blood plasma at the age of 18 and continued to do so for over six decades.

He gave blood more than 1,100 times.

He “retired” in 2018 only because of a rule in Australia that donors can only give blood up to their 81st birthday.

It is estimated that Harrison has saved 2.4 million lives through his donations.

His dedication to blood donation and humanitarianism has earned him numerous awards and honors,

including the Medal of the Order of Australia.

He was even in the Guinness Book of World Records for having donated the most blood.

Yes, he received positive feedback for his dedication, but think of what it means to give blood 1,100 times?

He gave of his own time, energy, and bodily resources.

He could have loved his life and said, “I don’t like needles.” Or “I’ll give blood once in a while, but I don’t have time to do this 20 times a year.”

But what about your own life?

Do you love your life in this world?

Or are you willing to die to the supremacy of your own self-preservation and advancement at all costs?

I’ve offered heroic examples. But this pattern of Jesus’ life usually isn’t heroic.

It’s ordinary. We can let the seed of our lives fall to the ground and die in small acts of service, unseen moments of care,

unheard prayers for the lonely, in collecting plastic, signing petitions, and planting trees.

Small ways of standing with God against the powers of this world.

Our passage ends with Jesus praying, “Father, glorify your name.”

God’s voice ringing out from heaven,

“I have glorified my name, and I will glorify it again.”

This pattern is not just Jesus’ command to those who follow him,

it is God’s way of being glorified. Look for the pattern this week.

Look for God’s glory in unexpected people and hidden places.