



First United Church of Oak Park

Changing the Light

John 12:20-28

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John 12:20-28 New Revised Standard Version (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.” ²⁷ “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

There was an elevator I used to ride almost every day and in it there was a sign that said “In case of emergency, do not panic. Press button marked, ‘panic.’” I was like, this sign gets me. As a person with anxiety, I am familiar with panic. Panic is what happens to me whenever I see an ending in sight. The last 30 minutes before a paper is due, the day before a move, or in emergencies... the potential end of me.

In our scripture today, Jesus is at the end of his ministry and his life. He knows that, and he says, “What did you think I was going to say, ‘save me from this hour’? No! I say go for it God, glorify your name!” What gives Jesus the ability to be so chill right at the end of his life? How is he not panicking, or at least pressing the button marked panic?

I once took my youth group to a farm where the farmer also happened to be a pastor. He said to us, if you want to eat, you need a working relationship with death, to respect it. And he wasn’t just talking about the cow from his farm that made our hamburgers that week. He called out the vegetarians, too. He said if you want to eat vegetables, you need to know about the field mice that died to make that possible. You need to know about the insects that died. You need to know that the soil is made up of dead animal and plant matter. Because without death, nothing would grow. Without death, there would be no new life. Period. End of story. That is a mind-blowingly brilliant aspect of creation’s design. When one thing dies, it goes on to be a part of a billion new things. We go on. And we really get around.

In his book “A Short History of Nearly Everything,” Bill Bryson says, “Every atom you possess has almost certainly passed through several stars and been part of millions of organisms on its way to becoming you. We are so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death, that a significant number of atoms, up to a billion for each of us, probably once belonged to Shakespeare.” In life, our bodies are in one place at a time. In death, it turns out we really do get around.

This is why Jesus uses the metaphor of the wheat dying and becoming soil that creates new life. This is a physical reality and I believe it matches a spiritual reality that Jesus is pointing to as well. In life, Jesus was one person in one place at a time. In death, he became present to all people at all times. Through story, through spirit, and through love. So as we near good Friday in less than two weeks, as we near the end of Jesus' life, we don't need to panic. Jesus' death is merely his becoming omnipresent to us.

In the godly play approach to Christian education, we have a beautiful way of sharing this physical and spiritual reality through story. We do this using the Christ candle, the candle that represents Christ's omnipresence among us. I'll share that story with you now.

Here is the Christ candle. I am going to change the light. Notice I didn't say I was going to extinguish it or blow it out. I'm going to change it. See how the flame is all here in this one place and time? Watch as I change the light. See it thinning and spreading out... becoming invisible. Now the light that was in this one place and time is spreading out to all places and will be able to follow you everywhere you go, always.

This is the mystery of our faith—that like Christ, we are never extinguished—our light only changes. Amen.