

Sermon for March 21, 2021  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Amy J. Howton

What an honor to be with you, the people of the Church of the Good Shepherd today. Mother Deborah has taught me the power of invitation--to pay attention to it--and so when she invited me to preach this week as she heals and recovers from her surgery, I paid attention. And, here I am.

This, the fifth week of Lent, Jesus tells us that to live, there is dying. He speaks of his own "troubled soul" at the face of this truth and how he chooses this life/death anyway. 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."

To receive this teaching, knowing the reality of Jesus' situation is almost incomprehensible--knowing that he was literally preparing for his own death. And then to also use this teaching to reflect on all the other forms of death and loss that come with the Way of Love--stretches the imagination and offers guidance along that journey. What does it look like to choose Love? What does it ask of us? And what does it offer?

A couple of weeks ago during a Becoming Beloved Community StorySharing session, stories were shared that spoke of pain and the wounds of White Supremacy. These wounds were not only historical ones--they persist today. Pain spilled out in the forms of rage and grief, as we held space for these stories in circle. The stories touched on truths seldom spoken--not only *communally* but even *personally*.

This was the purpose of this series--to offer an opportunity to practice the sacred act of story sharing and truth telling. To grow our capacity to hold these stories and in doing so, begin to form a new story of who we are as a community, as a church.

Following the session, I received an email from a participant expressing the choice to not return to the sessions. "I was devastated by these stories...it felt like a punch in the gut...deep condemnations of our church with no clarity about why." For this neighbor, here in this communal space created to hold these stories, the encounter of these other stories felt, in his words, "devastating". Even when we set out to do just that. It was too much; he did not return.

This is a normal response to the awakening to the truth that there is more to the story that we've held as TRUE. When we learn that our life--personal, communal--isn't what we thought it was.

When Jesus speaks of the grain of wheat dying in the earth, I recall this pain of allowing old stories to die. There have been hard truths revealed as half-truths that have gutted me: that my ancestors and family were not who I thought they were; that beloved institutions I had poured blood, sweat and tears were not who/what I thought they were; that my Church and my faith tradition was not what I thought it was; that teachers and friends were not who I thought they were; my marriage was not what I thought it was; I was not who I thought I was.

*There was more to the story.*

To learn new evidence that counters the stories we hold as hard truths...well, is devastating.

*As it is supposed to be.*

Growth requires the inclusion and transcendence of old stories, of the truths we once held so core, so foundational.

I'm drawn back to the teaching of Gloria Anzaldua, whose writing and spiritual activism have been a source of wisdom for over half my life. Years ago, in the midst of a devastating period in my life, I got this tattoo of Coyolxauhqui. I learned of her story from Anzaldua's writing. According to Aztec mythic history, Coyolxauhqui was decapitated and dismembered by her brother, Huitzilopochtli (Eastern Hummingbird and War God), who then flung her head into the sky and threw her body down the sacred mountain, where it broke into a thousand pieces. Depicted as a huge round stone filled with dismembered body parts, Coyolxauhqui serves as Anzaldua's symbol for the "light in the dark", representing "Both the process of emotional psychical dismemberment, splitting body/mind/soul and the creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new form...a labor of re-visioning and re-remembering." Anzaldua draws on this symbol to illustrate the process of healing and creative transformation.

Wisdom traditions offer universal truths that speak to such paradoxes: that death and life are one; that light and darkness are one; that healing is in the wound. We have those who have gone before us, spiritual leaders and elders--Jesus!--who have shown us the way.

And in reality, the process is still terrifying and so...devastating.

*As it is supposed to be.*

That is the story: that we must die. We must be dis-membered. In order to find life in a new form--to be trans-formed.

Coyolxuahqui offered me a powerful visual representation that symbolized what I felt like at that time in my life: pieces of myself scattered and splintered with the deep-down faith that in that process, there was also something creative and generative at work. Out of it, would come new life. And it did. With time and a lot of practice, I've learned to trust in these experiences of falling apart, knowing what they offer.

Working to unearth the delusions of White Supremacy has offered the most fruitful ground for this practice.

The delusions of White Supremacy offer a yardstick of what is right, real, and true that is based in fear, perpetuates lies of separation and independence, and compels the pitiful myth of control. It leaves God out of the equation; there is no role for Love in the age-old story of Fear.

How do we relinquish this yardstick when it has been used to measure the materials of our personal and corporate lives together?

Well, it has to be...*together*.

And this is where the delusion of the White Supremacy is both most exposed/potent *and* can serve as a helpful symptom, signaling where to pay attention. As a weapon, White Supremacy is exact in its separation and domination. It does not allow for authentic and right relationships that cultivate a sense of "together". We must unravel the beliefs about relationships that this yardstick has shaped for us (earning and proving ourselves worthy; the compulsion to fix/solve each other; to help) and re-member that we already and always belong to each other. In love. We must learn to lean into the sharp points, knowing that it is there--in that discomfort--that our growth and healing occur.

Jesus offers us the story of the "grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying". Here, it is helpful to turn our attention to "*into the earth*". The grain of wheat cannot be transformed alone; it must be held by and nourished by the earth. The

earth plays an active role in this process and is often overlooked. We cannot do the work of healing and growing up and becoming alone. We need to be held; we need to be nourished. We need to hold; we need to nourish.

Historical traumas have made this holding and nourishing a challenge. Even in our intimate relationships, our families, this is hard, much less extending that reach to neighbors and others. What does it mean, what does it look like to hold and be held in this falling apart?

It looks like love without condition. And yet...what does this look like in practice? Many of us do not know, having rarely if ever truly experienced this. Which is why we follow Jesus. To learn, to practice the Way of Love and become beloved community.

Yesterday (Friday), in our Becoming Beloved Community circle we did just that. We practiced. We presenced ourselves to the grief of this week's mass murder in Atlanta, including six Asian American victims, to the statement of the Vatican against same-sex marriage, to the violence and the othering and fear that is alive in our world. We chose to soften our grip on our old and current stories and welcome in new ones--making room for very different and diverse expressions of grief, rage, gratitude. We were the earth, receiving the grain of wheat and transforming it into something new. Together, we took the threads of our grief and gratitude and created a collective prayer, weaving together all the expressions into a new more whole story of us.

In these moments, there is a taste of the Love that Jesus speaks of, teaches, *is*: Love without condition. It is meeting the forces of fear and hatred with the force of Love, welcoming in each of us, just as we are--rageful, despairing, hopeful, hurting, grieving, even hateful. Once we taste it, we begin to re-member.

*There is more to the story.*

This is not to say it is easy. It is devastating. People turn away. And still, we practice.

Moving from the dismembering/disintegration part of the story into the creation part of the story calls for a different yardstick--it calls us to relinquish the lies of independence, certainty, control and to do as the grain of wheat and the earth do. Broken-heartedness, vulnerability, not knowing, uncertainty--these are not things to turn away from. The fear that comes with them is an invitation into a new story.

It is an invitation to be the grain of wheat, to fall into the earth, to be held and to be nourished into a new form of life. It is to allow ourselves nourishment in ways that are uncomfortable as hell and also life-affirming and life-giving.

And...

It is an invitation to be the earth, receiving the falling grain of wheat and hold it, steadfast. It is to honor its dying and nourish it into new life. The earth knows no fear--it does not fix or solve. She offers energy and resources in faith of the natural, divine order of life/death and the evolutionary impulse of Love.

And just as Mother Deborah has helped me to see, there is power in the invitation--it is worth paying attention to.

*Amen.*

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P.S. Thank you, Mother Deborah for your invitation and for your companionship in our journey in the Way of Love. Sending continued prayers for your healing and strengthening.

P.S.S. For those interested in reading the collective prayer created during our Friday Circle, visit <http://dsobeloved.org/our-prayer-for-this-moment/>

P.S.S.S. You are invited to join a Becoming Beloved Community Circle—either Friday, 10-11:30 or Tuesday, 7-8:30. For more info and to register, visit [www.dsobeloved.org](http://www.dsobeloved.org), check with Mother Deborah, and/or reach out to me, [ahowton@diosohio.org](mailto:ahowton@diosohio.org).