

**2 Lent B. February 28, 2021.**  
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**The Love of Sunflowers**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH**

How is a sunflower like the Love of God? In his book *Speaking of God* Trevor Dennis explains the lesson Jesus began to teach his disciples in today's Gospel reading through this story of a sunflower:

After a couple were killed in their home from a horrendous explosion destroying their home and the surrounding area, no one who lived in the community bothered to clean up the devastation nor do anything to mark it as a place where two people had died. The area became worse than run down, it was desolate. Everything was broken: buildings, sidewalks, lamp posts. Nothing grew in the sad, horrible smelling place, not even weeds. The only sign people were around was the graffiti covering the broken surfaces. For thirty years nothing changed.

Until one day, a sunflower began growing in the middle of the area. At first no one noticed because the people who lived there had become accustomed to not looking around or paying attention to their surroundings. But as anyone who likes sunflowers could tell you, it's hard to ignore a sunflower for very long. Especially one that grew six feet tall with a huge yellow flower standing above them. Most of the people who lived there had never seen a sunflower before. It's presence and its beauty had powerful impact on them. The people changed.

A few people were so moved by the sunflower's beauty they no longer walked around stooped over as if carrying a great, heavy weight or burden; they no longer felt tired or dejected or isolated like so many of the local residents. Most people were confused by the sunflower because it was so out of place.

The people decided to leave the sunflower alone, believing they would eventually get used to something so different. But in the end, they couldn't get used to it. They began to notice that the sunflower showed their community for what it was: drab, empty, unattractive, lifeless. This made many people bitter and angry. Like so many who find it easier to destroy what signals their discomfort instead of dealing with the source of it, they grew so angry they decided to destroy the sunflower. A large group of people trampled it, beat it down, crushed its stem, leaves, and bright, bold yellow petals until it was unrecognizable from the desolation.

As you might have guessed, it's impossible to stop some things. If you know anything about sunflowers, you know each beautiful flower carries inside it many seeds. By trampling the sunflower, the angry people had no idea they were actually planting many more sunflowers; their act of destruction was in fact an act of creation. The following summer, the area was filled with sunflowers; beauty overtook destruction, and the people had a beautiful marker for the loss of the couple who had died there so many years ago.

I love this story because it reminds me of the lesson Jesus was constantly trying to teach his followers, like we heard in the Gospel reading today, the lesson of the cross.

The Season of Lent is a time when we followers of Jesus prepare for the celebration of Easter, and the way we prepare for resurrection life is by joining Jesus on his journey to the cross. Most people I know aren't quick to talk about the cross, even if they happen to wear one made of silver or gold around their neck. Most people would rather avoid the topic, and it's no wonder. The tragedy, suffering, desolation, ugliness, and lifelessness of Jesus dying on the cross can remind us of all the injustice, pain, and suffering in the world and in our lives.

There is more pain the cross can reveal. Like a sunflower standing in the ruins of a once vital community, the cross can make us question assumptions we might make about Jesus, ourselves, and each other. The idea of Jesus hanging broken, suffering, bloody and powerless might make us wonder how could something so vulnerable be the incarnate Word of God made flesh. Especially if we imagine God is invulnerable, powerful, angry, and vengeful. The crucified Christ challenges such perceptions of God. The cross can also challenge our assumptions of each other, assumptions like some people "have it all together" or are happy because of their job, possessions, or family. Or assumptions some people are superior or have more value than others because of things like skin color, age, position, economic status, gender, or identity. The cross has a way of dissolving such differences into God's beloved who all deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. The cross stands contrary to how we might see ourselves based on our profession, academic standing, skills, abilities, or behaviors. The cross is the uncomfortable reminder we are all vulnerable and no matter what we have done or left undone, there isn't anything that will make God not love us. God loves us not by virtue of our health, looks, accomplishments, choices, or wealth, but simply because God is love.

As amazingly beautiful as this love is - like a sunflower-, it can still be source of pain. It can be painful when our assumptions are proven wrong. It can be a painful realization that strength does not mean batting away the suffering of physical illness, injury, or financial loss, grief, disappointment, but enduring through it. It can be humbling to realize God loves you without you having to earn it and disheartening to realize God loves the person you can't stand. It is not easy to understand the cross only looks like an ending, but is really a doorway to new life, one that doesn't have to look like life as it does now.

That might be why Peter spoke against Jesus and his teaching in today's Gospel. Peter like the other disciples left the life he knew, the one he was comfortable in, the one he could count on to not change, the one he understood and was equipped to handle, all in order to follow Jesus. He left his security, or at least his perceived security, to follow Jesus and perhaps understandably wanted to see some sign of security in the path Jesus offered. To be told by your leader they are going to suffer and die and rise again would be not only unbelievable, it was unthinkable. As their leader, Jesus needed to think of his disciples and be aware their welfare depended on him. He needed to give a show of being able to provide a life of security and prosperity for his followers. But as understandable as this thinking might be, we know it isn't the stuff of new life, of resurrection life. Which accounts for Jesus calling Peter "Satan" and telling him to get behind him.

In the Hebrew scriptures, Satan is the Accuser, not the embodiment of evil. The Accuser was one of God's angels whose job was to accuse or judge when humans followed their own selfish ways instead of God. In the Book of Job, we see this angel is so fatigued by how prevalent this behavior is, he bets God even the best person on earth won't be able to resist the temptation to curse God when things get difficult, when they suffer. In today's Gospel, Jesus seems to recognize this temptation in Peter's rebuke, which may be why he called him "Satan". Jesus is about to show even the Accuser how far God is willing to go to show each and every one of us how much God loves us. Not by removing suffering or providing a life free from loss, but by participating it.

We, like Peter, might feel the temptation to see Jesus as our personal Messiah instead of the suffering one, the hero who will save or spare us from suffering and get us whatever worldly security we yearn for. But Jesus didn't live, die, and rise again to provide a new way to make our old lives work. Jesus didn't become incarnate, die, and rise again so that we could build big church buildings and fill them with people, or get our dream job, or dream car, or whatever we think will make us happy. Jesus came to show us how far God is willing to go to be near us, to be with us, even if it means suffering with us. That is why those old ways -

those assumptions I mentioned earlier - need to die, so they could be transformed into doorways of new life that might look like sunflowers taking over a former wasteland.

Many of us have noticed how this long, on-going pandemic had brought to light so much suffering and injustice we were not aware of before. Perhaps we had become so conditioned to the way things were we didn't notice them before. Because the pandemic has gone on so long, many people are reporting fatigue. They are tired of taking safety precautions like mask wearing, social distancing, staying away from large gatherings, and all that hand washing. But what they really seem to be tired of is seeing over and over again the problems we have as individuals, families, churches, communities, society, and a country. Even more troubling is how these problems are not easy to solve. Perhaps today's Gospel and the lesson of the cross might give us hope and courage to let another assumption go: the assumption that after the pandemic is over, we will go back to the way things were before. Perhaps today's Gospel lesson might encourage us to envision a different version of normal that learns from our observations during this pandemic. Perhaps Jesus' lesson about the cross can help us realize the suffering we are enduring during this pandemic can help us grieve losses and figure out what is necessary to change. Perhaps today's Gospel might embolden us to put into practice changes that will make our world, our families, our church, our community, more like a community transformed from the devastation of unawareness and unresolved grief to being covered with the new resurrection life like so many beautiful sunflowers.