

Lent 5B "
Jeremiah 31:31-34
John 12:20-33
Wheatley U.R.C.
25 March, 2012

Odessa: "Ms. Thompson, I don't want your children to grow up scared of mine."

Miriam: "It's just that a lot of the whites are scared. I'm a little scared."

Odessa: "We all scared. But what's scaring you, Ms. Thompson, who you are—or who Mr. Thompson wants you to be?"

-The Long Walk Home (movie)

The movie, '*The Long Walk Home*' opens with a scene of three black women dressed in their work uniforms, waiting for the city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. When the bus rolls up, they climb the stairs at the front of the bus and put their fare into the meter. Then they descend the steps, exit the bus, go to another set of doors at the back, and re-board. Odessa Carter, the woman we saw in the film clip, is one of the maids in the opening scene. By the time she boards the bus, there are no seats open at the back of the bus, so Odessa has to stand for the ride across town—although most of the seats in the front half of the bus are empty. A narrator's voice—that of a grown woman reminiscing about her childhood maid—recalls, "There wasn't anything extraordinary about her... but, I guess there's always something extraordinary about someone who changes. And then changes those around her."

What unfolds is the story of how Odessa's decision to participate in the black peoples' boycott of the Montgomery bus company impacts everyone around her. Her decision to participate in a broader movement to nonviolently advocate for black civil rights, challenges the family she works for—and her own children—to reflect on their fundamental ideas about the relationships between people of different skin colours, not to mention relationships between men and women, and the unthinking patterns we repeat as collective communities.

Odessa Carter's story shows us how one person, living with integrity and courage according to her convictions, can change lives. Odessa was willing to admit that she was scared. But she prayerfully relied on a strength from God beyond her own, and found herself able to carry on through the pain and humiliation that her choice brought upon her, even when it was dangerous, possibly even life-threatening. And Odessa's courage and determination inspired Miriam Thompson to release her own need to cling to a safe but soulless life—an existence in which she realised that she wasn't suffering bodily harm, but she felt herself dying personally, spiritually. Challenged and emboldened by her maid's faith and courage, Miriam began to live a life of freedom, a life that was truly alive—not according to the laws and social rules around her, but according to the law that was written on her heart.

'In very truth I tell you,' said Jesus, 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains that and nothing more; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest.' Grains of wheat, in other words, must in a sense die to what they are if they're ever to become what they have the potential to be. So long as that single grain of wheat clings to its identity as a single grain of wheat, it will never be able to open up to the abundant life that could spring from it.

The drama in the scenes leading up to this pivotal moment had been building. In

Chapter 10, John says that the Jews were growing increasingly divided about Jesus: they couldn't decide whether he was a force for good or evil. In Chapter 11, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, driving the chasm even wider. The writer of the gospel recalls: 'Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.... [T]he chief priests and the Pharisees convened a meeting of the Council. "This man is performing many signs," they said, "and what action are we taking? If we let him go on like this the whole populace will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and sweep away our temple and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said, "You have no grasp of the situation at all; you do not realize that it is more to your interest that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation should be destroyed." (John 11:45-50)

In Chapter 12, Jesus goes to the home of Lazarus in Bethany, where Mary anoints his feet with some costly perfume—and Judas objects. Word gets out that Jesus is in the house, and Jews come from all over to see him. The next day, as crowds gather around him, he rides a donkey into Jerusalem—and the adoring throngs stoke the greatest fears of the Jewish leaders. In the verse just preceding our lesson for this morning, John reports: "The Pharisees said to one another, 'You can see we are getting nowhere; all the world has gone after him!'" (John 12:19)

As if to confirm the Pharisees' sense of the situation, we hear that there were some Greeks—people who had traveled a great distance—looking for Jesus at the festival. All the world *is* coming after him—it's not just the Jews, but now the Gentiles are also recognising the truth of his message and are believing him, wanting to hear more.

Clearly, Jesus understands the politics of the situation. He may not have heard Caiaphas, but he's clever enough to know that the Jewish leaders already plotting for his destruction are not going to waste another moment when their worst fears about him seem to be coming true.

"The hour has come," Jesus says. "It is an hour to which his whole life has been leading, an hour in which he is to be glorified. It is clearly important to him that his disciples have some understanding of this hour, yet what he offers them is an oddly jarring proverb"¹ about grains of wheat dying if they're not to remain alone and fruitless.

His teaching about the wheat, of course, extends to our own lives: each of us must in a sense die to our love for our own life, lest in loving ourselves and our perceived security above all else, we lose sight of what's meaningful about life and paradoxically destroy ourselves. In the crucial moment depicted in our gospel lesson, Jesus chooses to accept death in order that he might not ultimately sacrifice the meaning of his life. He squarely accepts the prospect of suffering, humiliation, and death at the hands of those who do not understand him, and who do not understand divine truth, himself knowing that the Truth will vindicate him. His death will give way to far more abundant life in ways unimaginable to himself and those who are seeking to do him harm.

"This 'hour' of which Jesus speaks, then, sounds like a cautionary and foreboding tale of diminishment, destruction, and loss—even though it may have a happy ending. Indeed, as the hour comes, Jesus admits that his very soul is troubled. Yet he does not ask to be spared this hour—because it bears the reason for his life."²

¹ Margaret A. Farley, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2, p. 140.

² Ibid.

In this pivotal couple of verses, we have a central revelation of God's wisdom and action to those who can understand it. Not that it was easy to grasp for the disciples at the time, any more than it has proven to be for centuries of theologians—who still struggle with how to articulate it.

"Clearly the 'hour' is the time of Jesus' completion of his mission. It is the time of his absolute and salvific surrender to the God whom he calls Abba."³

Across the centuries, some theologians have tried to explain Jesus' saving action as a sacrifice on the order of a blood offering to an offended and angry God. It's commonly called a 'penal substitutionary atonement theory', where a price is demanded in order to redress the catastrophic injustice and wrongdoing of human hearts past and present. Under this theological approach, the only thing that can substitute and somehow pay the penalty price for the heinous weight of humanity's sinfulness is God's own perfect son. Arguably, it makes for a tidy economy... if you assume that God expects a penalty price to be paid before actually forgiving us.

But friends, penal substitutionary atonement theology leaves a lot to be desired if we believe in the testimony of Scripture and the living witness of Jesus Christ. It's inconsistent with the image we heard in our first reading of a forgiving, creative, loving God as depicted by Jeremiah—a God who does not stop loving those who have repeatedly hurt and betrayed their God, but instead gets more imaginative in her determination to make that law of love a real part of each person, by writing it on each one's heart.

And it certainly does not adequately reflect the God revealed in and by Jesus Christ as a God of mercy and love. Twentieth-century theologians like Karl Barth and Karl Rahner argue, instead, that [contrary to a notion of reconciliation that requires an atonement penalty to be paid before anything else can happen] the initiative for reconciliation comes from God's own self."⁴

Margaret Farley, an ethicist from Yale University, summarizes the restorative theology this way:

"The No of humanity, with its resulting radical incapacity to reverse itself, could be changed only by the Yes of God, but this Yes must rise also to God out of the genuinely human. The Fourth Gospel makes it clear that the incarnation of God is the first movement in God's action to reconcile humanity to Godself; it is an action of self-emptying, which will be consummated in a final free, surrendering love. Hence, the 'hour' in the end is not unexpected. The God who became human will effect an action of ultimate love by dying on the cross of human existence.

In and by this action, Jesus gathers up the whole of his own human existence, takes to himself the whole of the human situation, makes possible the Yes of humans into an unending future, and reveals the kind of God whose love can no longer be questioned.

No matter what the forces of evil will do to Jesus, they will not take from his heart his love for God. The 'hour' of utter self-abandonment, and acceptance even of abandonment by God—the hour of love that holds 'no matter what'—is a consummation. A human Yes, forever sealed in death, meets the divine Yes, and neither will be revoked."⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 142-144.

This is our story—here is our song: God has assumed our human form, has become as one of us, in order to bring us once and for all back to Godself. In an ultimate act of love and self-emptying by the Creator and Sustainer of all life, God in Christ Jesus allowed human beings to strip him of his dignity before also enduring a most torturous killing.

But the moment of glory, and the mystery of salvation lie in the fact that death did not have the final word. Jesus gave himself over and breathed his last at the hands of his enemies—but it was not the end of him; rather, it was the beginning of new and everlasting life. The seed of life had appeared to drop dead, to the ground. But it had returned a hundredfold, a thousand-fold, and beyond.

“Within this mystery of salvation and ultimate glory, there lies one more message for the disciples of Jesus. ‘Whoever serves me must follow me,’ he said, ‘and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour’ (vs. 26). The disciples, too, will be ‘delivered up’ to forces of evil. They will be asked to drink the same cup Jesus drinks, to carry the same cross, to make the same absolute surrender—not to evil, but to God.”⁶

You and I may not ever (yet) have been faced with an opportunity to take a stand that asks us to risk life, liberty, or personal safety in quite the same way that Jesus, or even Odessa Carter and Miriam Thompson did—or indeed, as any of the real-life champions of Civil and Human Rights like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., or countless other brave souls have done and do even to this day for the sake of love.

But the invitation is to us no less than any other: ‘Christ strengthens us, calls us to live as children of the day, to shine where shadows still oppress, to walk his risen way.’⁷

Amen.

⁵ Margaret A. Farley, Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 2, p. 144.

⁶ Ibid., 144.

⁷ Colin Thompson, ‘God glory fills the universe’ *Rejoice & Sing* Hymn 275, verse 4.