

Letting the seed coats decay

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:1-12, John 12:20-26

There are three stories I want to use to frame my thoughts this morning:

It was a snowy and cold December. It was the end of my university years and I was faced with the inevitable question of, “what will I do next?” I was feeling a little bit burned by the fact that I had a very promising job lined up, that didn’t turn out. I was a nervous wreck – uncertain of my future.

I’ve used this other story before, but I’m going to tell it again – because I promise, it’s still relevant. 😊 On a trip to the Isle of Iona, I was going onto this trip with some relationship baggage. Everyone who travels to Iona has some sort of baggage. But this situation felt impossible for me to let go of. I was frustrated and hurt. It consumed me and I was obsessed with trying to solve the problems that I was faced with.

The church is in a state of flux. There is fear about whether we will see our way through to the end of difficult conversations without splitting. The church is looking at restructuring in order to save itself from falling apart. It’s hard to see exactly how we can have a sustainable future for the church, given its state and the money available to support it.

In these three situations there are so many questions that we ask ourselves:

Will I ever have a job?

Will I make enough money to live?

Will I live in my grandparent's basement forever?

Will this consume me?

Will I ever be able to let this go?

Will I ever be happy?

How can we become more sustainable?

Can we be a church for all people?

Are these the right questions to be asking?

To better understand the questions that we need to ask ourselves in these situations, we can look at today's scripture. At a first glance, the Jeremiah text seems like an odd choice. The Book of Jeremiah is a conversation piece. The book reimagines the past and presents visions of a new and utopian future that God alone will bring.

Jeremiah 31 presents a new covenant that God is making with Israel. This is a promise of a new covenant made with the people, different than the one made on mount Sinai with the Israelites. A covenant in the Old Testament was a treaty that took place between two parties of equal strength or unequal strength. A covenant dictated the relationship between God and the people the covenant was established with.

Covenant is a central theme in the Old Testament and first appears when God makes a covenant with creation (Gen 9:8-17), promising to never again destroy the earth with a flood.

God also makes a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:17); promising him offspring and the land of Canaan.

The exodus from Egypt illustrates the Lord's loyalty to covenantal obligations (Ex. 2:23-25) and launches the Israelites on a journey to the promised land of Canaan.

The kind of covenant proposed in Jeremiah is different. *"This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."* The covenant that is being presented here suggests that this covenant is formed within our body. "Heart" in this biblical story is not our literal hearts, but it's our entire being. It's our mind, body, spirit, emotion, and personal will. God is performing a heart transplant like no other. Instead of writing a covenant on a tablet that is easy break – it's being written on our hearts, within the core of our bodies.

This covenant will change things up. *"No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall know me, from the least of them, to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."* In this covenant, we will become equals. Everyone will know God equally. The new

covenant will heal brokenness, repair relationships, heal broken families, and create a new future.

This covenant provides a challenge. It shows that God desires a relationship with us in a very deep, powerful and intimate way. This isn't an easy covenant to break without cutting out an aspect of our selves, however it is easy to ignore or avoid. All of our own problems can conveniently get in the way - the stresses about our jobs, the complexities of our relationships, or the worry for our church, or family, the list can go on. How can we honor this relationship with God that is engrained into our being?

The Gospel reading that accompanies today's text is from John chapter 12. This story signals the end of Jesus' ministry. *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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."* Through the metaphor of a seed, Jesus teaches his death will bring new life because it produces *fruit*, which is a metaphor for the community of faith that will grow from his death. Jesus' death creates new life for the community. Jesus' ultimate act of service is the gift of life, so the community is now called to follow Jesus and to serve one another with the same kind of love. This is a love that seeks to make right community that heals brokenness, repairs relationships, and creates a vision for the future. This is a love that comes from a deep place within. I'll make a little bit of a stretch here and say that perhaps, this is a type of love that is rooted in a covenantal promise written on our hearts. Jesus' parable, and his

example, shows us that in death there is life. When the seed coat decays, new life flourishes. Jesus' example ask us the question, *what has to die in our lives so that a new covenant, written on our hearts, can bear its fruit?*

This is difficult. We have so many things that we concern ourselves with. So many issues we need to face. Performance measures. Savings goals. Benchmarks. Emotional distress. *What has to die in our lives, so that God's new covenant can bear new fruit?* There are ways pathways to allowing something to die, but there is no simple answer. Surrender is one of those things, and letting go is another.

When I was faced with struggling to find a job, there was a long process of first, letting go. *"Why God? I followed the call, and this path to serve...but yet there isn't a place for me."* In those moments – I had to **surrender**. I had to trust that God was leading me in the dance – and I had to blindly follow – having no idea what the steps were.

When I was travelling through Iona, I participated in a half-day pilgrimage. The weather was beautiful. It was warm with the sun shining. We walked to one beach and the guide asked us to pick up a shell that we absolutely loved and to carry it with us. We walked to another beach on the other side of the island. We arrived and the guide asked us to take out our shells and hold them in our hands. This shell was to represent all the baggage we brought with us on this trip. For me, this shell represented that relationship that was causing me so much trouble and pain. Our guide said that these shells

represented the things that needed to *die* in order for us to be more open to how God might be leading, and working in our lives. We were asked to toss it in the ocean. We **let go**.

Rachel Held Evans was asked the question recently about her view that the American church shouldn't be afraid to die and what that meant.

She responded with this,

G.K. Chesterton said, "Christianity has had a series of revolutions, and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave." Lately I've been wondering if a little death and resurrection is exactly what the American church needs.

Held-Evans is suggesting that perhaps we need to accept the realities of death, because like the gospel story – we can be hopeful that God is alive and at work. We can be hopeful in our God who knows the way out of the grave. On the contrary, allowing something to die is difficult. Death itself is difficult, because even after death there is still lingering pain. Sometimes the pain that comes with death lasts a lifetime, and many of us know this. Just because I surrendered my own concerns for my career, and let go my baggage by tossing them into the ocean in a rather cliché manner, it doesn't mean I still don't think about them – or that I am not grieving those losses. However, I have now made a deliberate attempt to mark a desire to change and be more open to God at work.

What needs to die for **you** so that a new covenant, written on your heart, can bear its fruit?

Marriage problems?

Disagreements with co-workers?

Irreconcilable relationships with friends?

Desires for personal financial security?

Anger at God?

Doubt?

Fear?

Suspicion?

What might need to **die** in our church, in order for the new covenant to fully bear its fruit?

Concern for the future?

The church institution itself?

Fear?

Suspicion?

Our own personal agendas?

The “this is the way we’ve always done things” attitude?

These are tough for us to face when we think about *what needs to die*.

Do we get in our own way when it comes to allowing God's promised covenant to bear its fruit?

How do we know that God is really at work? Where is this *new* fruit? I'd like to believe that this new fruit is evident in *change*. Change suggests something is growing, or evolving, like fruit that evolves as it grows.

Wildwood Mennonite Church has gone under lots of change. We've embraced a change of staff here at Wildwood in the last three years. We've embraced change through a very new, and young church council. We are embracing change with our budget, strongly desiring to live out God's call for our church and our financial gifts. We are also embracing change through our renovation project. We embrace newcomers that seem to be coming through our door every Sunday. There is no denying that we are changing. How can we be open to identifying what might need to *die* amidst the change in our church in order to bear new fruit here in Wildwood? What things do we love that need to be tossed into the deep and vast ocean?

Today we are embracing another change. In this change, we are celebrating God's call and gifts for one of our own staff and friend. We are performing a ritual today that will commission Krista Loewen as our new Associate Pastor. As a congregation, we are embracing change through this ritual, and we are embracing Krista and her passion to serve God and the church. We are tossing our shells in the ocean, and marking our openness to how God's new covenant may come alive in this new ministry format for

Wildwood. As we let the seed coats decay, we remain hopeful of new fruit to be born for Wildwood, for the life of the church, and in life of Krista, promised in the example of Jesus Christ.

We leave today accepting the challenge to identify the areas in our lives that need to die in order for the new covenant to come alive. When we can't seem to let go, when we struggle with honoring our covenant with God, moving towards God's vision of new community, when we struggle with letting something *die* - it's not a matter of working harder to make ourselves holy or good. Rather, it's opening ourselves to allow God to do the heart transplant of a lifetime on us, and accepting **over and over, and over again** that **this is the new way of being**, and that we are eternally God's people, bound together in covenant.

In closing, please join me in prayer:

O God, You know us inside out.

You know all things, and see all things.

*You know the **stuff** that need to be let go.*

We confess the times when we struggle with letting the seed coats decay.

We confess the times when we have not faithfully followed you in the dance, and instead chose to lead.

We confess the times we have struggled to surrender to your will and your vision.

We open ourselves to your leading, O God.

We open ourselves to your new covenant – sealed upon our hearts.

We open ourselves to change.

Create within us a clean heart O God, and put a new and right spirit with us.

Amen