

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 17, 2024 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year B)  
John 12:20-33

Some years ago, just before Thanksgiving, Tom Lind, a salesman from Montana, was making his rounds, traveling his regular route along the southern Oregon coast. As usual, he was in his older model pickup. Looking to continue his route south and east, Lind made a fateful spur-of-the-moment decision. He opted to take the scenic route. Only a few miles on this highway, however, the elevation ROSE RAPIDLY, and good ol' Oregon drizzle transformed into swirling snowflakes. Tom was in his big pickup, so he kept going. But the snow kept coming. Soon Tom found himself in the middle of a WHITEOUT BLIZZARD.

Forced to pull over, Tom decided to rest for the day. By nightfall his pickup was a barely discernible LUMP of white in a vast LANDSCAPE of snow. Still, Tom wasn't terribly worried. He was in his big pickup. Soon the road-clearing crews would be along and would help him escape the cold clutches that HELD him and his truck CAPTIVE.

What Tom DIDN'T REALIZE was that the scenic route he'd chosen was CLOSED after the first winter snowfall. The Forest Service didn't MAINTAIN that road in ANY way. They would NOT be coming up that way until the SPRING THAW.

But Tom didn't know that. Convinced that someone would be along as soon as there was a break in the weather, Tom was DETERMINED to do the SMART thing: STAY in his truck, avoid the RISKS of exposure or getting hopelessly lost in a snow drift, by HUNKERING down in his big truck.

When he failed to arrive at his next sales appointment, family and friends and state and local police forces began SEARCHING for Tom. No one THOUGHT to venture up that little-used, completely snow-blocked, back trail that TOM had chosen. When the weather cleared, and the sun shone down on Tom's trapped vehicle, the salesman opted to CONTINUE being smart and safe: he STAYED with his truck.

It seems IMPOSSIBLE to understand NOW, but Tom STAYED with that truck for over EIGHT weeks. He kept a journal of his thoughts, his hopes, his fears, his considered options. But still he SAT in that truck. Eventually he grew TOO WEAK to have any REAL OPTIONS anymore. By Christmas, he COULDN'T have walked out if he'd WANTED to.

At the end of January, a group of back-country skiers inadvertently came ACROSS Tom and his safe-haven pickup. Tom's journal revealed that he had finally died sometime around January 15<sup>th</sup>. His emaciated, dehydrated body was STILL in his TRUCK. In trying to MINIMIZE his RISKS, Tom THOUGHT he was choosing to SAVE his life. It turned OUT, Tom was choosing to LOSE his life.

Jesus said, "Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Clinging to SAFETY, never doing ANYTHING DIFFERENT, never taking a RISK, NEVER CHANGING, is NO WAY to live. In Tom's case, it was LITERALLY NO WAY to live. The way to life means GETTING OUT of the truck. It means SOMETHING needs to CHANGE.

Jesus explained what he MEANT with a MINI parable: "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."

It's easy to see (for US, who know how the story ends) that the wheat Jesus refers to is his OWN death and burial, which will be followed SOON AFTER by the RESURRECTION. In order to BEAR that fruit, in order that ALL people might be saved from their sins and have eternal life, it was NECESSARY for the Son of Man to DIE, and be buried, like a SEED.

But then Jesus says something SURPRISING: "Whoever SERVES me must FOLLOW me, and where I am, there my SERVANT will be ALSO." Now THERE, he's talking to US. He's carrying his analogy a step FURTHER. In order to be FRUITFUL, WE, his FOLLOWERS, are to be grains of wheat TOO. OUR OLD SINFUL SELF, the part of us that HOLDS us BACK, and KEEPS us in the

TRUCK, NEEDS to DIE. It's NAILED to JESUS' CROSS, so that God can raise US up, WITH him, to a NEW life.

There's SO MUCH TRUTH to Jesus' words in this parable. If a seed ISN'T buried in the ground, it doesn't HAVE any life. It doesn't PRODUCE ANYTHING.

I remember some years ago, Wendy and I went down to Yellowstone National Park. You could still see the scarring of the forest fires they'd had there a few years before. And they had these interpretive centers there, showing movies about the fire, and IN them, people were saying that it would take a hundred years or MORE for the forest to come back to its former glory, and people were MOURNING what had happened and saying that they wanted their children to see the SAME park THEY had grown up with.

But as we drove around that park, we saw something interesting. The parts of the park that had NOT burned were actually overgrown. There was a lot of underbrush. It was all kind of scraggly and brown. It wasn't all that attractive. But in the parts of the park that HAD burned, there was new life springing up all over the place. There was this beautiful, vivid green everywhere.

And it hit us, if that fire hadn't come and CLEANSED those parts of the park, they would be dying all on their own. The people who wanted to keep it the SAME, were actually KILLING it. But God, WORKING THROUGH FIRE, the NATURAL PROCESS in a forest, was actually bringing NEW LIFE.

That's what happens with a SEED. A seed that ISN'T BURIED stays pretty much the same. But if it's buried in the ground, it ceases to be JUST a SEED anymore; it becomes something NEW and BEAUTIFUL. It sprouts up with NEW life to make something WONDERFUL.

The same is true with us. It's said about human life that the moment you STOP GROWING, you DIE. It's true of us physically, it's true of us emotionally, and it's true of us spiritually. When you STOP GROWING, when you stop CHANGING, you DIE.

Christ's words are true. He comes into our lives and CHANGES us. The SINFUL PART of us is BURIED AND DIES, and we become something NEW, something BETTER.

"When I am lifted up," Jesus goes on to say, "I will draw all people to myself." And just in case we're tempted to interpret this up-lifted status to mean something glitzy, John's Gospel sticks in a little commentary in verse 33 to make clear that the "lifting up" Jesus had in MIND was the CROSS. Ultimately, Jesus WOULD get lifted up in the ASCENSION to HEAVEN, but the FIRST TEN feet of his ascension came by way of a CROSS. Jesus' upward journey STARTED when the Roman soldiers HOISTED him up at CALVARY.

So, if you want to SOAR off into GLORY with JESUS, you've got to be part of the FIRST TEN feet of the journey, as well. You can't just prop up a ladder on the SIDE of the cross and meet Jesus at the TOP, for the REST of the trip. You've got to be CRUCIFIED WITH him. You need to BE the kernel who gets buried into DEATH WITH him. We don't get to SKIP the CROSS and go right to GLORY. "Where I am, there my servant will be also."

OUR OLD SINFUL SELF, everything that's KEEPING you from REALLY LIVING, NEEDS to DIE. It needs to get NAILED to that CROSS, so that JESUS can take it WITH him to the TOMB. It needs to DIE, so that YOU can be RAISED WITH him, so that you can have NEW life NOW, and ETERNAL life to COME.

Like the Greeks in the story, WE come to Andrew and Philip and say, "Sir, we wish to SEE JESUS." And Jesus answers, "Those who wish to SAVE their life will LOSE it. That's NO WAY to LIVE. If you wish to SEE ME, then you need to get OUT of that TRUCK." Amen.