

Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 29, 2009  
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As many of you know, our daughter Sarah is in her third year at the University of Chicago studying GeoPhysics. The science curriculum at that school does not allow for its students to take a lot of elective courses. So over the past three years, Sarah has doubled up for a few semesters so that she could spend a semester abroad. She landed in Athens, Greece this past week for a year's worth of elective credits in Greek language and culture. She will be there until the summer.

It's funny for us to think about our Sarah that far away from us and on her own in a strange city with a foreign tongue. This is the child who, four years ago wouldn't even order her own food in a restaurant. She's come quite a ways in a short period of time.

One of our favorite childhood stories about Sarah comes from the time she was just old enough to start fitting into Katie's hand me downs. Katie loved OshKosh B'Gosh clothes, the cute little overalls especially. Well, one day we pulled out some of Katie's clothes to present them to her and the instant she put the first outfit on, she turned to her mother and said, "Mom, I am NOT a farmer!"

So much for using hand me downs. She spent her youthful years wearing pink.

It's not surprising that she said that, the Bang family is far from agrarian. I grew up wandering from military installation to military installation, finally landing in suburban Long Island. Debby grew up wandering from international bank to international bank, finally landing in suburban New Jersey. Our girls were both born in Buffalo and grew up here so the most they were exposed to farming was the farmer's market on Bidwell Parkway or our annual trek to find a pumpkin each Halloween.

But...the other day I was doing the man thing at Home Depot, aimlessly wandering the aisles, and I saw this little seed starter kit, and next to it, don't tell me they don't know marketing for men, was a marvelous display of seeds of all kinds. So I bought the kit and six packets of seed: sweet basil, patio tomato, parsley, chives, and rosemary.

I came home excited about my new career and put the little compressed peat packets in water and watched them swell up to ten times their size (which alone was worth the price I paid for it). Then I meticulously placed a few seeds in each, covered them with the little plastic cover and put them on top of the TV cable box (for warmth) and placed the array in the window.

I could almost taste the tomatoes, and smell the rosemary.

Every morning I would come downstairs to the kitchen to see how my lower forty was doing. Well, to my surprise, within a week, there were little plants sprouting up from the little peat pods I put them in. The basil came up first, then the chives, then the tomatoes and the parsley. But the rosemary was nowhere to be seen. I was disheartened until our daughter Katie came home to tell me that she had done the same thing a few weeks ago and her rosemary came up two weeks after all the rest, so my hope was rekindled. Finally, a few days ago, there appeared signs of life from the last two pots. I felt empowered: went out and bought a pair of overalls...onesies with a little clerical collar built right in.

So, you can see where my daughter gets it.

I'm sure some, if not most of you have planted some kind of seed before, whether it be parsley, sage, rosemary or thyme. Most of you, I'm sure, have at least planted some grass seed. For anyone who has ever planted seed, after you plant it, when you come back to look at it, few of us come back to look at the seed, rather, we come back to see what the seed has become, if anything. We come back to our little seed propagator, or our front lawn, or our garden patch to see what has become of the seed, and to watch as the plant grows and becomes something.

The seed is not what we come to see, but rather, what the seed can become. The power that is contained in the seed is its potential for life. Unless that which is the seed dies, nothing happens. The seed needs to cease being a seed, in order to find life. Unless that which it is falls into the earth to release that which it can be, its purpose remains unfulfilled. The farmer doesn't come out into the field in the spring to see the seed lying there. He comes to see the seed die and come to life in the plant that breaks through the crust of the soil searching for the sun and for life.

St. John records these words.... *"Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24Very 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. 25Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."*

The time was Passover, the place was Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples had come to town for the annual festival: so, too, had thousands of others. While he was not known nationally, he was well known locally, at least in and around Galilee and Jerusalem. Many had heard of him, how he miraculously healed people, how he challenged the local temple authorities, how he had the courage to reinterpret Scripture. They came to see the miracle worker, the one who fed five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of salted fish. Some probably came with their own illnesses and demons, hoping to be cured.

But when they approached Jesus, hoping for a show, or a miracle, or a word, he said, *"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. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."*

While he did perform miracles and he did miraculously heal people, while he did turn water into wine and calm the storm and walk on water, the reason for his coming had little to do with these and most to do with what was to befall him on Good Friday and what God would do with his death the following Sunday morning. If you want to see Jesus, you have to see him on the cross, and once you see him there, only then does the real power of what happened three days later come to the fore.

Because where our lives most closely intersect with his, is in our dying. We have that in common. And so it is this existential question, what happens next, that reveals his true mission. The true purpose of the seed is to die, so that it may become something else, so that it may find life and in living, grow and serve.

He says, “If you want to come see me, you have to see me as I give my life for others, and if you want to become my disciple, you have to do the same.” What it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, is to give your life to others as he gave his for us. And if you’re looking for the motivation to do so, all you need to do is look to the witness of Easter and the inheritance God promises us.

- To those who came seeking something, Jesus gave a mission.
- For those looking to come away with some benefit, he gave a charge.
- To those who come today, hoping for a cure or a miracle or a healing or a blessing, he gives a directive.
- For those looking for something for themselves, he directed them to live for others.
  - Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your mind
  - Love your neighbor as yourself
  - When I was hungry you gave me something to eat
  - When I was thirsty you gave me drink
  - When I was lonely or sick or imprisoned, you visited me
  - Whenever you did it do one of the least of these my children, you did it to me

“Truly, truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit.” The seed needs to cease being a seed, in order to find life. Unless that which it is falls into the earth to release that which it can be, its purpose remains unfulfilled.

Just a thought for you to keep for the remainder of your Lenten journey.

Amen.