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## "As Seed is to the soil..."

BY PASTOR JOHN HILLMER

We began Lent on Ash Wed with ashes smudged on our foreheads. Today – back to the dirt again.

*"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."* (John 12:21) That's the desire of their hearts (the Greeks – in today's readings). The age-old request of millions! People through the centuries – through two millennia - skeptics, as well as the faithful. Cynics, as well as the sincere. "We want to see Jesus". "Show us!" There are historic answers: academic and intellectual, as well as in art, symbol, and architecture.

There's a 200 year old church in Philadelphia, with this large, towering pulpit that the preacher must climb every Sunday to preach. Carved into the wood panel on the front of the pulpit for the people to see are these very words: "We wish to see Jesus". It's meaning? One "sees Jesus" in the proclamation of the Gospel. Good Lutheran theology – Christ is present in the Word. The name of the church by the way: St. Philip Lutheran Church. "Philip" of today's Gospel.

At University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, WA – in the front of the chancel, carved into the altar table, again the words: "We wish to see Jesus". It's meaning? We see Jesus in the bread & wine of the Sacrament. Again – good sacramental theology – "Christ is present in the Eucharist."

Two good and solid answers: Christ is present (can be seen) in "WORD" and in "Sacraments". But to be tight with the text and context of the Gospel do you want to see Jesus? Then look at a grain of wheat. Watch how it dies. Watch how it bears a harvest. You'll see Jesus.

The thing is no one wants to die. No one wants to let go. That's the conundrum; the paradox; the struggle. It doesn't come naturally. We work so very hard at letting go, sometimes, trying to train ourselves to release our grip on all that is not God. But what if it is not about giving up but giving in? Falling into dirt, as Jesus says here. Going where grain is supposed to go.

Remember back in high school algebra – with ratios and analogies? “If  $A = B$ , and  $B = C$ , then what does  $D$  equal?” <or something like that!>. As seed is to soil, as Jesus is to life then what does that say about faith?

So do you remember that kerfuffle back in the 90s when Mattel brought out a new Barbie doll called Teen Speak Barbie? Barbie was programmed to say what Mattel considered to be typical adolescent girl phrases. One of the lines – so it was said – that Barbie spoke was: “Math class is tough!” Talk about an uproar - protests erupted and Mattel excised the phrase.

At this point in the Lenten journey, I find myself getting in touch with my Inner Barbie. Call her Ecclesiastical Barbie! Lent is tough!” or “These words of Jesus are hard!” True enough - our scripture passages this lectionary year - give us some intense, tough and complex words. Depth of meaning, and symbols and images, and strong emotions and crucial challenges. These texts challenge us to look with honesty at our lives. They urge us to sit with our own mirrors. Lent is not for sissies.

In these past weeks, we have traveled with Jesus into the wilderness; listened to his challenge to discern between the things of heaven and the things of earth; witnessed his outrage; his outrageous cleansing of the temple; we've heard him liken himself to the serpent that Moses raised in the wilderness. Now he comes along, in this week's gospel, speaking of grain and dying, losing one's life and keeping it, hating and loving. We hear a thundering voice from heaven speaking of glory, and Jesus talking of being raised up from the earth.

Yet unlike others, other religions/philosophies, who speak of losing the tethers that hold us here – that the “material world” is bad – that ‘matter is evil’ and ‘spirit is good’ - Jesus retains a passionate interest in this world. Despite any impression he may give to the contrary (“those who hate their life in this world will keep it,” he says this week), Jesus does not perceive this world, this life, merely as a prelude to heaven; or as a stockyard or as a place for weeding out the blessed from the damned. He instead seeks to train our eyes to perceive the kingdom of heaven tucked into the midst of this very world.

How is it with your soul at this point in our Lenten journey? As you work with these texts, how are these texts working on you? What questions have they stirred up in you in these days? How do you respond to the mysteries and paradoxes they hold? Can you rest with those questions and mysteries? What do you need?

Maybe Disney's movie "Frozen" catches it. "Let it go". Let it go, for with the 'letting go' can come 'new life'. Letting go brings freedom. That grudge you've been holding - Let it go. That anger that's been burning a hole in you, 'cause someone dissed you - Let it go. That worry - Let it go. Worrying is not going to add one ounce of strength. Let it go. Let it die. Send it to the dirt - and like a seed in the soil - let the new life come!

God is here. God is at work. God is not afraid of those parts of our lives that frighten us. God does not value us as the world does. God will not give up. God is on the side of life and love. And the love, mercy, and life God offers is stronger than the hate, judgment, and death that too often colors the world.

Amen.