

- **St. Mary of the Angels Sunday Lent V B 3/18/18**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-23**  
**My Brothers and Sisters,**

Next Saturday, the youth of our country will march on Washington to protest the current easy access to weapons of death. They will be marching for their life and for ours.

With today's Gospel Jesus begins his march to death and through death into life. Today we look at his death-to-life journey and at our own as well.

For Jesus the critical moment was precipitated by a group of Greeks, i.e., Gentiles, outsiders, approaching the Greek speaking Philip, in order to express their ardent desire, "We would like to see Jesus." The Greek makes it stronger: "We want to see Jesus." As soon as Jesus hears their request, he knows that his hour has come. The non-Jewish world is now standing at the door begging to enter, and Jesus knows the cost of opening that door. This is a whole new life, but, for himself and for us, he will have to go through the door of death to bring that life. He captures the moment with a powerful image: "unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Death is the necessary prelude to this greater life.

Now, perhaps, it was the all-day snowstorm that kept us homebound last Tuesday, or, perhaps it is the tragic absurdity that is going on in our government that I wanted to escape, or, perhaps it was the mention of wheat in the Gospel that I was reflecting on, but I found myself day-dreaming about next summer's retreats in Scandinavia.

The retreat house in Denmark stands the edge of the deep channel that separates Denmark from Sweden on one side, and, on the other, looks out on wheat fields and hay fields and pasture land. I have often thought of that retreat house as a symbol of both death and life.

During World War II the house was the headquarters of the German High Command patrolling the channel to prevent Danes smuggling their Jewish neighbors under cover of darkness to neutral Sweden. As such, it was a house of death.

But now, this building, as a retreat house, symbolizes life, as all kinds of people: Catholic and Protestant, religious and lay, old and young, people of various nationalities, come there because, like the Greeks of today's Gospel, they want to see Jesus. They want to know Jesus more and have him more deeply present in their life. So, they come for nine days of silence and prayer.

When I arrive there in mid-June, the hay is being cut and bundled in large bales. It is interesting to watch the process in those long Scandinavian evenings, but I prefer to wander the paths through the wheat fields and watch the wheat ripple with the soft breezes from the ocean. And, during the weeks I am there, I will see the wheat grow from knee high to shoulder high, from light green to golden yellow. And, during those weeks,

we always have the parables about wheat: “The Sower and the Seed”, “The Wheat that grows effortlessly at Night” and “The Wheat and the Weeds.”

A few years ago, I decided to pluck a couple of stalks of wheat to see if they actually did produce 30 or 60 or 100 fold. And they do! Side by side! I have here two stalks, one of 30, the other too numerous to count because of the uneven rows. I wondered whether Jesus didn't pluck them too, not just to eat, but to count.

With grains of wheat we ponder the mystery of death and life. “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain; but if it dies. It produces much fruit.” We see the truth of this statement when we contemplate wheat and accept it as evident. Dying is essential for fruitfulness. Death is essential for life. Do we accept that same truth for ourselves? That does not make death or dying easy, but it does make it meaningful. Jesus acknowledges that he is troubled, but he also knows that it will be by being lifted up on the cross that he will draw all people to himself and bring them into eternal life. He knows that by dying he will glorify his Father. As Scripture scholar John Shea wrote, “This is the glory of the Father: to bring greater life out of lesser death.” (J. Shea p. 102)

There is an old saying that goes, “Die before you die so that when you die, you won't die.” Jesus puts it this way: “whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.” The words “love” and “hate” here are misleading. Of course, we love our life, but we must not so cling to it that we ignore or neglect the care of others. For those who die in this life by serving and sacrificing for others, death is not extinction but exaltation – as it was for Jesus. But, if we cling to ourselves, if we keep holding on to the past or what we possess, we will lose the freedom to live in the present, and will be fearful of the future.

The German poet Goethe expressed it this way in his poem “Holy Longing”:

“... so long as you haven't experienced

**This: to die and so to grow,  
You are only a troubled guest  
On the dark earth.”**

In dying now in our daily sacrifices and surrenders, we keep growing into fruitfulness and eternal life. There is true happiness!

So, as I gaze on the fields of wheat in the summer, or, contemplate a single stalk of wheat in the winter,

- I marvel at the **POWER** of God that brings forth so much life out of death,
- I marvel at the **WISDOM** of God, that sees the darkness of death not as an end but simply as the prelude to the brilliant light of new birth,

- **And I marvel at the LOVE of God that has shown us the way by embracing in God's Self the very worst that death can do and by rising in the absolute fullness of glory.**

**Jesus is truly the way, the truth and the life.**

**So, whether it is Jesus' journey, our own journey, or the march of the youth of our country, we are all choosing life, real life, and are willing to pay the cost to reap its fruitfulness.**

**Kenneth J. Hughes, SJ  
Brighton, Mass 3/18/18**