

**Sermon for March 22, 2015**  
**John 12:20-33**

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.” Growing up on a farm and gardening for most of my life; I could easily relate to this piece of wisdom from Jesus. When you look at most seeds, even before you put them into the ground, they already look like they’re dead—they’re all shriveled up and dried out with just enough energy in stored sugar and proteins to start the growth process when conditions are right. The death of the seed begins new life.

But what if you don’t know anything about seeds; what if instead you’re interested in fishing. Think of the salmon that travel hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles to return to the place they were born so they can spawn. Something inside of them drives them over rocks and dams and waterfalls to return to their birth place. Once there they dig a hole and lay their eggs and then they die. The death of the salmon allows for new life to begin.

Many of you know that I am a Star Trek geek and so I’ll put this in another way. One of my favorite Star Trek movies is the Wrath of Khan. At the very end of the movie the starship Enterprise is in danger of being blown up along with the ship that Khan has stolen. In order to save the ship and the lives of those on board; Mr. Spock enters the reactor chamber to bring the warp engines back online. In doing so he has exposed himself to a lethal dose of radiation.

As he lay dying Mr. Spock explains to his best friend Captain Kirk why he did what he did with the following sentence: “The needs of the many outweigh the

needs of the few or the one.” With the sacrifice of his own life he has ensured that the lives of those on board will continue.

Jesus has just entered triumphantly into Jerusalem at the time of the Passover and Jesus knows that it is six days before his death. There are hundreds of thousands of people there in Jerusalem from all over the world to celebrate the Passover. In this crowd there were two Greeks who wished to see Jesus. They go to Philip and Andrew who had Greek sounding names and they ask to see Jesus.

When Philip and Andrew tell Jesus about the Greeks; Jesus who is preoccupied about his death tells them, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it will remain a single seed. But if it dies, it will produce many grains of wheat. For whoever will find their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will find it. If anyone would serve me, they must follow me. They must follow me in death.”

That seems to be a strange answer to give to someone who wants to see you. But maybe there’s a connection—to see Jesus is to see the importance of dying in order to live. Could it be that the key to life is death? Could it be that the key to living is dying? Could it be that dying is important to living? Could that be the key to our lives?

But that message is so different from the one that the world gives us that self-preservation and avoiding pain are so important. However if we look closely we see it in nature—in the grain of wheat and in the salmon—that death is necessary for life. If we look closely we see it in Paul’s writings and in writings

from those who believed in Christ: It is only by first dying that we will ever begin living.

In Paul we read: “We will not be united with Christ in a resurrection like his, unless we are first united with Christ in a death like his.” St. Francis of Assisi wrote in his famous prayer for peace: “it is in giving that we receive; it is in dying that we are born again.” Once again Christ wants us to live not as the world would, but as God would—by dying.

But what does it mean to die? It means dying to self, to selfishness. It means dying to “I,” the old Adam and the attitude that I am going to live for me and my family and that my purpose in life is my self fulfillment and experiencing all that life can give me. Life is my preoccupation with my happiness, my successes, my failures, and what others are thinking about me. I am the center of the universe.

When we die to our sinful nature of self-centeredness we can live for others. Or to put it in another way instead of seeing matters as being “life or death,” we can see them as “self-preservation or life-giving sacrifice.” That may mean saying “no” to a career in order to say “yes” to a call. It may mean dying to self in order to save a marriage. It may mean having a less luxurious lifestyle in order to give life to Third World areas. Each one of us is called to die everyday so that we can serve the needs of the many. Where are you being called to die?