

SERMON: The Hour Has Come
TEXT: John 12:20-33

3-21-21

Sinsinawa Mound Center is one of the most spiritual places I've ever been. It is located high on a hill in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, in the southwest corner of the state, right at the border with Iowa and Illinois. It is the home of the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa who are devoted to study, prayer, and caring for people and the earth. The massive and breathtakingly beautiful center hosts group and individual retreats, concerts, workshops, and has an art gallery, a bakery, a book and gift shop, and acres of land to enjoy and explore. It is truly as the website describes it: a place "where the Spirit dwells and the Gospel lives."

I used to go there for retreats and study leave when I was serving a church in central Iowa. Unfortunately, it's a much longer drive from southeast Missouri, so I haven't been in many years.

But there's one thing in particular I will always remember about my time there. I was exploring the grounds one beautiful autumn day when I came upon a simple graveyard. As I strolled through and viewed the markers of the sisters buried there, I noticed something that still speaks to me today. On every gravestone was the name of the sister and only one date, not two. I was quite puzzled by this

and continued to look, now more carefully. Soon I realized, it wasn't like some gravestones we see, where a husband and wife share one stone and are both named, but one of them has only the date of birth engraved as that one is still alive. But the dates on the sisters' gravestones were only their date of death.

At first, it felt morbid, offensive, and insulting to these faithful women who had devoted their lives in service to God. Without their date of birth, it seemed to send the message that their lives didn't matter. Only their death. Only their death?

I pondered this for a long time, and then it finally came to me. The day a sister dies is the same day she is born. Into eternal life.

I must admit, I don't know this for a fact. I haven't researched it or asked any questions to confirm my revelation. But I have come to the conclusion that it's not morbid or offensive or insulting at all. It's the goal. It is because of their life of faithful service that they have reached their reward.

I know. I'm not sounding very Presbyterian right now. We believe we don't have to earn our way to heaven with good works. Our salvation is a free gift which we have through the death and resurrection of Jesus. I still believe this with my

whole heart. And yet, “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.”

These are words that Jesus spoke following his entrance into Jerusalem, where he would soon be arrested, tried, and crucified. “THE HOUR HAS COME,” he said to his disciples, “for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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 nearly as puzzling to me as the sisters’ gravestones with only their date of death. I’ve had to ponder it for a while to understand what it means. Jesus - who called himself the Bread of Life - is the grain of wheat, anticipating his own imminent death. He knows he must die in order to bear fruit. In order to accomplish our salvation. “I am the Bread of Life,” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

One commentary explained, “In John 12, Jesus again refers to his coming *exaltation* along with other imagery from the Gospel to reinforce his dramatic statement: *The hour has come so that the Son of Man might be glorified!*” He is the seed who will fall, die, and yet produce much fruit, and he is the one who willingly

gives up his life (*psychē*) on behalf of others in obedience to his Father's will. Jesus is so sure of his mission that he undercuts David's cry of lament in Psalm 6:4 for God to save him from this hour, and [Jesus] instead cries out: *For this hour I came!*"

(Alicia D. Myers, www.workingpreacher.org, March 21, 2021)

This is where the journey was leading. This was the destination. This was the goal. THE HOUR HAS COME for Jesus to die. On a cross. But his death will bear much fruit.

Furthermore, as Jesus continues to speak, he implicates his followers in this metaphor. "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

These words of Jesus, this message that we must lose our life to save it, (which is found in all four gospels) answer the question asked in that old Lenten hymn. *Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th century theologian and Nazi resister penned the words, “When Christ calls a [person], he bids him come and die. We cannot follow Christ into heaven without following him past a cross.” Bonhoeffer spent two years in a German prison for teaching in an underground seminary, serving as a double agent in the German secret service, and helping countless Jews escape the Nazi’s. He was hanged at an extermination camp at Flossenbug one month before Germany surrendered in 1945.

Of course, we are not all called to be martyrs. And, if we are being honest, we don’t hate our lives in this world. We enjoy life, and we shouldn’t have to apologize for that. But there is a cost.

One of Bonhoeffer’s most notable works is a book he wrote in 1937 titled, *The Cost of Discipleship*. It is described by *Christianity Today* as “a call to more faithful and radical obedience to Christ and a severe rebuke of comfortable Christianity. [Quoting Bonhoeffer]: "Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” (www.christianitytoday.com)

As another theologian explained, “[We] already know that Jesus is on a mission in the world because God loves the world (3:16) and that the world does not recognize Jesus (1:30) but hates him (7:7). It is no good to love oneself or the world as alienated from God; the only good way to love either is to love them in Jesus, in whom they gain life through death. One must *hate* one’s own, and the world’s, alienation from God.” (James D. Ernest, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2)

In other words, what we are called to “hate” and what we are called to “lose” is whatever keeps us away or draws us away from God.

The season of Lent is about sacrifice. Rightly observed, Lent includes fasting, prayer, and charity. THE HOUR HAS COME for us to devote ourselves as genuine and wholehearted followers of Christ. We are called to devote ourselves not only in the words, “I believe,” but in our actions. In how we relate to one another. In how we live our lives in this world. In being willing to drink the cup that Jesus drinks. In being willing to bear the cross on which he dies.

Though death awaits us all, it is not a literal death to which we are called, but death to whatever keeps us from producing fruit for Christ. Death to whatever keeps us from glorifying him.

People of God, may we be faithful in all our words and deeds... to the glory
of God!

AMEN.