

10-18-25 Presbytery Sermon: “Bearing Fruit” – John 12:20-26

“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.”

When I introduced this year’s theme for Presbytery – Transitioning Well – with a focus on dying, merging, and transforming churches, I joked that I was aiming to become the most depressing Moderator in Santa Fe history. And with just a few minutes left in my term, I am proud to say that I have very nearly accomplished my goal! Really, who in their right mind wants to spend a year talking about dying churches?

The Scripture we just heard is Jesus’ last public teaching in John’s Gospel, before he and his disciples head to the Upper Room. The disciples know something is up; they can feel the tension in the air. So Jesus says to them, “Listen, the hour has come 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.”

Jesus, it seems, is also in the running for most-depressing-moderator. For he is regularly confronting his disciples with death – his death, their deaths, the death of the Second Temple institution, around which their faith community revolves. We are not surprised when the disciples resist these conversations – we resist them, too.

You know, there’s something particularly difficult to swallow about the death of our beloved institutions. We accept that we as humans will live and die, but we’ve got this sense that the things we build together *must* live on – they’re our legacy! If there isn’t something still standing after we’ve all come and gone, does it mean we’ve failed? Will anyone even know we lived at all?

Let me give you an example. Fifteen years ago, I was a Young Adult Volunteer in Peru, where I worked with a fair-trade organization started by a group of Presbyterian missionaries. The organization, Partners for Just Trade, connected artisans around the world with an American market of consumers committed to paying fair prices for their products. Since working with some of these artisans, I’ve taken great pride in buying all my stoles, jewelry, home decorations, etc., through this non-profit.

Because one of my superpowers is losing just *one* of a pair of earrings, I went to Partners for Just Trade’s website a couple years ago to place an order. And I was shocked to see a statement on their website that they’d closed up shop. I was heartbroken, outraged – what Presbyterian bureaucrat cut their funding?! (Mind you, this was years before the entirety of World Mission was sacked.)

But then I read the statement. And it said, “Listen, when we founded this organization in 2002, very few people in the US knew what fair trade was. In the two decades since, it has grown exponentially. Fair trade exporters are everywhere, and there is demand for these products in wealthier countries. Fair trade is ‘cool’ now; it’s sexy. Our artisans have access to a variety of markets where they can receive a fair wage for their work, and these organizations do better business for our partners because they are global exporters, not Presbyterian missionaries. Our work here is done. We close our doors with gratitude, knowing that our partners are in good hands. We move on to whatever it is that God will call us to do next.”

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus says, “it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

We in this room are familiar with America’s shifting religious landscape. We’ve heard the statistics many times; they may still be difficult to digest, but they no longer shock us. If current

trends continue, as many as one-third of American churches will close their doors in the next 20-30 years. For people who have invested their lives in this form of Christ's ministry, that reality feels...well...bleak.

You know what's interesting, though? The more I talk with people doing this work of closing, merging, transforming, transitioning churches, the more I'm struck by the fact that they are *not* bleak about it at all. "Yes, there is grief," they say, "Absolutely, there is great loss."

But they also share stories of the hope they have encountered, and of the resurrection they have witnessed. Stories of congregations who turned their buildings into affordable housing and rented back space to worship. Or others who closed and gave their land back to the indigenous people to whom it belonged in the first place. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

We in the Presbytery of Santa Fe have our own stories, now, to add to the canon. We've got the story of Community Presbyterian Church in Datil, which worshipped for 62 years before making the difficult decision to close its doors in 2020. But before they did, the congregation made sure that Catron Food Pantries would still be able to operate out of the building. And to this day, people continue to go to that sacred place to be fed.

We've got the story of Camino de Vida, a Spanish-speaking, largely-immigrant fellowship in Albuquerque that worshipped God and nurtured disciples. After their closure last year, the Presbytery sold their building to another Spanish-language Christian community, Restaurando Corazones. So God is still worshiped and disciples are still formed on that *tierra sagrada*.

There's the story we heard today, of First Presbyterian Church of Raton, who gave their building to the nonprofit Grow Raton, who will turn that beloved space into a performance venue and incubator for small businesses. And their manse – which they gave to "Restoring our Communities" to become affordable housing. So the community and still being nurtured, and the poor are still being uplifted, on that land that has meant so much to so many through the generations.

Friends, these are hard stories. They are bittersweet stories, for we cannot discount the loss. But Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."

And we can see – can't we? – how these churches are still bearing fruit for God's love and God's justice in their communities. Harder to measure – but just as real – the disciples who grew up in and were shaped by these congregations continue to bear fruit as they live their lives for Christ in this God's beloved world.

Friends, this is the good news: churches may be dying, but God is not. In a dramatically changing religious landscape, God is still working out God's purposes in the world. And God is still calling us – God's people – to participate in this work. We get to be a part in this season of bearing fruit.

A few moments ago, Karen read the necrology, the names of the faithful ruling and teaching elders in this presbytery who have died in the last year and joined the Church Triumphant. Remember, beloved saints of the faith: You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

What is it we say in the funeral liturgy? "You only are immortal, O God, the creator and maker of all. We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth we shall return. This you ordained when you created us, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Friends, if this is true of God's beloved children, why would we expect God's beloved *churches* to be any different? If all of us go down to dust, can we really be that shocked when our institutions begin to crumble?

The liturgy continues, "All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia."

That's still our song, y'all. Alleluia. It's a song about God, not about us. Not even about our churches.

Friends, God is still alive and well, at work in our broken, beautiful world. And God is still calling us to the holy work of bearing fruit.

That work will look different than it did before, no doubt. Are we willing to give it a try?