

## “Seeds of News Life”

Rev. David Gregory

March 21, 2021

Lent 5



### Readings

*John 12:24-25*

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

*A Small Needful Fact*, a poem by Ross Gay

from the book *Healing the Divide: Poems of Kindness and Connection*

edited by James Crews

Is that Eric Garner worked  
for some time for the Parks and Rec  
Horticultural Department, which means,  
perhaps, that with his very large hands,  
perhaps, in all likelihood,  
he put gently into the earth  
some plants which, most likely,  
some of them, in all likelihood,  
continue to grow, continue  
to do what such plants do, like house  
and feed small and necessary creatures,  
like being pleasant to touch and smell,  
like converting sunlight  
into food, like making it easier  
for us to breathe.



Ross Gay

As we observe this fifth Sunday in our season of Lengthening, we want to note how it coincides with yesterday's vernal equinox. This is a moment of balance with equal amounts of light and darkness, and it creates an opportunity for us to reflect on the balance we would like to see in our own lives. We began this journey deep within the womb of the winter solstice, at which point our Light began its steady increase. And now we are midway in this great collective inhalation whose height we will reach on the summer solstice, or the day of longest light.

In this part of the world we are emerging from some days of glorious rainfall, and the green hills all around us appear to be deeply grateful. They are responding with colorful flowers and fresh new grasses. My walk this morning was filled with the sounds of birds under the canopy of an infinitely blue sky that invited me to just stand and stare. All around me I see the force of Spirit coming to us in seeds and sprouts from the great long lineage of a living earth. If winter is our gestation, then these moments signal our impending birth, or a rebirth of energy that has always been there, just waiting for the agreed-upon moment, under the right conditions for new beginnings. This is where we are in life, in the cosmos, and also in the biblical story.

The gospels tell us of some uncomfortable moments between Jesus and his close friends. Internally, he was on a very resolute journey toward crucifixion, but his disciples had very different ideas. They saw in him all of their hopes for the future, with the possibility of a coming kingdom which would restore the power of self-determination to Israel. Privately, they saw in him the elements of the promised messiah, and they were unable to entertain the possibility of a different path. In both metaphor and in clear declarative statements, Jesus foretold a different future, one which would require the disciples to follow his example of love and sacrifice, to inhabit a realm that wasn't readily visible to them, where all that he had taught them was true, even when it did not appear as tangible. He told them that they would need to let him go, in the same way that a farmer releases dead-looking seeds into a prepared soil, and when the time is right, and under proper conditions, a great harvest can be realized.

If only the disciples could have understood that they *were* this great harvest, and that the three years they spent following Jesus around the cities and the countryside only served to cultivate the right kind of soil to produce *in* them everything they needed. They anticipated a political solution, an external messianic kingdom that would release them from the grip of Rome, but Jesus told them that the only way forward was to let go, to release him like a seed to the ground, and allow the earth itself with all of its holy wisdom and sacred efficiencies to produce something beyond their ability to imagine. This kind of letting go takes more trust than most of us can find within ourselves. Releasing our hopes and dreams, giving up our hard-fought momentum, and surrendering a future we thought we wanted—these run counter to everything we've been taught about life, about faith, and about the results of our very hard work. It sounds downright un-American.

For decades, we've rehearsed the phrase "Let go and let God ...," and yet somehow it seems more philosophical than practical. But what if it were truly practical? What if the tangibility of all of our new beginnings rested solely on the decision to let go, to release, to give over? What if this were a muscle that we could exercise and gain the facility of? The muscle, I think, is called faith. Faith has never been easy, but it has always been the pathway to life and co-creation. This co-creative life is the only thing that really matters. As we all know, our lifetime has an expiration date. And what part of ourselves remains when we have left the physical plane? All that we have co-created, including our children, our words, our art and music, our ideas, our habits, our customs and traditions. The list is really endless, and we leave all of it behind us. We take none of it with us. If in this life we cultivate some good soil, then all that we have planted will produce a bountiful yield.

Recently I was introduced to the loveliest book called *Healing the Divide: Poems of Kindness and Connection*. It is a collection of contemporary or fairly recent poets, edited by James Crews, and though it was published not long before the pandemic, it's as if it has been sent to us for the pandemic. In my consideration of seeds and soil, I came across a piece by Ross Gay, entitled *A Small Needful Fact*. Its form is one long, rambling phrase which never quite seems to form a complete sentence, and at the end it's impossible to tell if there should be a period, a comma or a question mark. It's like a snapshot of the poet's mind taken before the thought could be completed, or maybe that's just it. Maybe it's meant to be a seed planted in our souls that continues to grow.

The piece references Eric Garner, whose death by asphyxiation from a prohibited chokehold at the hands of police, occurred on Staten Island nearly seven years ago. The poet wants us to recognize that Mr. Garner at one time worked in horticulture with the local Parks and Recreation Department. Out of his final words, "I can't breathe," came a symbol of an entire racial justice movement that continues to the present day. So we should just think about the fact that Mr. Garner probably placed plants in the ground that may indeed continue to live long after his death, producing the very oxygen that he was denied. In a very real sense, given the oneness of all things, the plants that Eric Garner left behind are making it easier for us humans to breathe.

This is how it is, you see, and it becomes an excellent metaphor for the very human truth that Jesus was trying to teach a couple of millennia ago. We do not control the externals. We cannot always effect a shift in the actions of others, or account for how a member of the police force uses such a tactic, or how the Romans found it necessary to crucify a young rabbi in the first century. All we have to work with is what has been left behind. It could be a tree in a park, a great work of art, or a cookie recipe. It could be the heritage of one of the world's great religious traditions, or a practical suggestion on how to fix a broken bicycle.

Our best laid plans are not always the best plans. We may or may not be called upon to sacrifice our lives for the common good, but we are often asked to release our grip on what we think we want to see, or do, or have. And if we can become more adept at the essence of faith, and let these seeds fall to the ground, the world and the human family that occupies it will be forever grateful.



*The Sower*  
James Tissot