

Sermon 5th Sunday of Lent Year B, March 25, 2012

When I was a boy growing up on Lake Michigan, the beaches were covered with an invasive ocean fish called **alewife** that traveled up the St. Lawrence Seaway and populated the Great Lakes by the mid-1950s. As the summer advanced, they would die and litter the beaches by the millions. The answer to this problem came in the late 1960s when Salmon were introduced into the Great Lakes. The first salmon were planted in streams off of the Manistee River in my home town. In a few short years the alewife, a favorite of the salmon were controlled and my home town became a salmon fishing Mecca. However, in late summer you would see the salmon returning to their spawning grounds. These huge mature salmon, with noses turning white and bellies and backs turned black would lumber along the bottom of the water to spawn.

A salmon has an instinct inside of it to bring it back to the place of its birth. After spending two or three years in the Lake they would swim back up the stream of their birth, the salmon were preparing to die. These salmon come back to the place of their hatching. At the end of their long laborious journey they dig a hole, lay their eggs and die. And out of those eggs comes new life. For it is ONLY through dying that there is new life among the salmon.

The story for today finds Jesus six days before he was going to die. How would you feel if you knew for sure you were going to die this coming Friday, six days from now? Now if you knew that you were going to die this coming Friday wouldn't you be preoccupied with death? Distracted by it? Would you not become philosophical about death?

Well, in the passage for today, Jesus is philosophical about death. He is philosophizing; he is thinking; he is contemplating for it is only six days until he is going to die.

The story today is in the city of Jerusalem. It is Passover time. Literally hundreds of thousands of people are gathered in Jerusalem, from all over the world, crammed into the city walls.

In this wild mass of humanity, there were a couple of Greeks in the crowd. They came up to the disciples and wanted to talk with Jesus. These Greek travelers came up and listened into the conversation of the disciples, and they heard that one disciple in particular had a Greek accent. Bethsaida, where Philip was from, was a Greek speaking city on the western side of the Sea of Galilee in Israel. The Greek travelers thought: “ That guy speaks Greek. He must be one of us.”

And so they approached Philip and asked him in Greek, “Can we SEE Jesus?” That’s often the question in the Gospel of John, “Can we SEE Jesus?” Philip went to Andrew and the two of them went to Jesus and said: “There are two Greeks who want to SEE you.”

Now you think that Jesus would have answered them directly, but he didn’t. Jesus was distracted. Preoccupied . He was preoccupied with his death in six days, he said: “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 his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will find it. If anyone would serve me, they must follow me. They must follow me in death “

Now that's a weird answer!!! Wasn't that a weird answer? All the Greeks wanted to do was to see Jesus, but Jesus was preoccupied with death, was distracted by death, was thinking about **his** death. But maybe there is a connection: That is, to see Jesus is to see the importance of dying in order to live.

You can almost see Jesus words; they are so visually clear. "If a seed is planted into the ground and it does not die, it remains a seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds and seedlings and those seeds and their seedlings produce much fruit." His words are visual. It all begins with the seed dying.

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? Let's consider what actually happens inside a seed.

Inside every seed is an embryo, and in that embryo is a root which goes down into the ground; and a shoot that goes up into the sky. Every embryo has a root and a shoot; and inside that little embryo, there is an "on" and "off" switch to trigger the process of germination. Every seed has a little "on" and "off" mechanism. And when you plant a seed into the ground at the right temperature for that seed for, that mechanism goes on, but if the temperature is too low or too high, the mechanism stays off. Now there is also a thin coat around that seed which protects the oxygen from coming in prematurely.

And then when this dormant seed is planted into the ground, and the switch goes “on” and the seed takes in water, it miraculously produces protein; and then out comes the little roots and the little shoots, and the shoots produce more seeds which produce more fruit. And that’s what happens when a seed dies.”

Jesus said, “Unless a seed dies, it remains a single seed; but if it dies, it produces many seeds and then much fruit.”

And so there is a parallel between the seed and the salmon. In both the seed and the salmon, death is necessary for life. Dying is important for living.

This is a fundamental law of life; that dying is important for living. This is a law of human psychology; it is a law of human sociology; it is a law of human relationships. It is a law of divine spirituality. And the law is this: it is in dying that we begin living. It is only by first dying before we will ever begin living.

St. Francis of Assisi knew this law well when he wrote in his famous prayer for peace; “it is in giving that we receive; it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” Amen.