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First Congregational Church of Granby
Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent
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Text: Jn 12:20-33

Faith in a Seed

Ever since the snow started melting a few weeks ago, I've been checking my lawn for clover sprouts. When Nicole and I bought the house five years ago, the lawn was full of bare spots. I've been planting grass seed in the bare spots for years with not much luck, so last fall I tried something different. I added fresh topsoil to the bare spots and planted clover seeds. YouTube said fall was the best time to plant clover. So ever since the snow started melting a few weeks ago I've been regularly checking the lawn for clover sprouts. I've noticed a few sprouts in a couple of different places, but so far most of the seed hasn't come up. So right now I have this mix of hope that in a month or so the bare spots will be full of beautiful clover and worry that once again I will be disappointed. Growing from seed is tricky business. As any farmer or gardener can tell you, conditions have to be just right.

The miracle of the seed is that one produces many. Without this miraculous multiplication, agriculture wouldn't work. From ancient times to today, agriculture is based on the premise that one seed will produce a plant that in turn produces many, many seeds. So we humans and the

animals we raise can consume most of the seeds or fruits or grain as long as we reserve a portion to put back into the ground for next season. In this way nature provides for itself an unending cycle of abundance that sustains all life.

In our Scripture today Jesus uses this familiar metaphor to talk about discipleship: “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.” What does this mean? John makes it clear. Jesus is talking about his death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus is the seed. Ancient understanding of agriculture was different from ours today. They did not know about DNA, for example. It’s easy to imagine an ancient person observing a seed and thinking it “dead.” After all, compared to the plant that produced it, a seed is inert, lifeless, like a corpse. Unlike a corpse, however, we know that a seed isn’t dead, it’s dormant. It contains all the necessary elements for creating new life given the right conditions. While the ancients expected “dead” seeds when planted in the ground to produce live plants, they did NOT expect corpses when put in the ground to produce anything other than worms. So if Jesus is the seed that dies and is put in the ground, what is the “abundant fruit” that his death produces? We are. We are the fruit of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

In his “Strange New World” podcast for this week, Dr. Matthew Myer Boulton, a colleague of mine, asks not what does resurrection mean, but what is resurrection for. He sees in Jesus’ seed metaphor three episodes of Jesus’ life that build to a great crescendo. The first is the crucifixion. The seed dies and is buried. For a human corpse. This should be the end, the finale. But it’s not! Three days later Jesus rises from the grave and appears to his disciples. It’s a miracle! We are amazed, elated, afraid, doubtful. But it doesn’t end there. Jesus has promised that after his resurrection, he will go to heaven and in his place send the Holy Spirit who will continue to guide and inspire his followers to do, in the words of Jesus, “even greater things than these.” Jesus leaves the earth and sends the spirit so that each one of us can be his heart and hands for the world. In this way the earthly Jesus, the single grain, becomes the Spirit of Christ animating countless followers throughout space and time. That’s a lot of fruit. What is resurrection for? For this very opportunity to be the church together.

After telling his followers about the seed, Jesus goes on, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” In other words, Jesus is inviting us to imitate him. Jesus is the seed. We are the seed. Our hymnal has a song that goes, “You are the seed that will grow a new sprout; you’re a star that will shine through the day; you are the

yeast and a small grain of salt, a beacon to glow in the night. Go my friends go to the world proclaiming love to all, messengers of my forgiving peace, eternal love. Be, my friends, a loyal witness from the dead I arose; “Lo, I’ll be with you forever, till the end of the world.” We are the kind of seeds that grow new sprouts. Leave behind the old in favor of the new. That’s what Jesus means when he says, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” You can’t stay a seed and also bear fruit.

The job of the seed is to make more seeds so that many can be fed. The job of the disciple is to make more disciples so that many can be blessed. In it’s values statement the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ states that “We understand the local church exists to make disciples of Jesus and we welcome all people unconditionally to share in this calling.” All people means you and me. Making disciples sounds difficult and strange and uncomfortable, but it really isn’t. It’s as easy as making a friend. One of the most memorable things my youngest daughter said when she was a child was, “Everyone’s my friend, it’s just that some don’t know it yet.” As followers of Jesus, every we meet is already a friend. As Dr. King said, we are all “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

Followers of Jesus simply recognize that connection and help others to see it. As we share the love that binds us, it grows.

Jesus says, “Unless a seed dies it remains a single grain.” A more literal translation of this line is: “Unless a seed dies it remains alone.” We are not alone, but until we expose ourselves to the elements, until we allow our self-protective shells to be split by heat and cold and rain and wind, until we allow the spirit of life to take hold and shape us until something unrecognizable, we will never know the truth of our intimate connectedness with all of life. For First Congregational Church it means letting go of church as we have known it and stepping boldly into the church as it might be. It means shedding the shell of familiar worship, familiar faces, familiar spaces, and stepping out into the unknown. It means asking not what kind of church do we want but what kind of church does our town need. It means literally talking to our neighbors and asking, “What kind of church would you go to?” It means collaborating with South Church in envisioning a new future. The church that was is not the church that will be, but it doesn’t mean that the old church is gone. It simply means that together through the power of God’s spirit, we will become a church resurrected.