

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Loving and Hating"  
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Fifth Sunday in Lent

I've been struggling all week to try and get right what Jesus teaches us in John, chapter 12. He starts us off with a basic agricultural or gardening principle. You're not going to get anything in your garden until you sacrifice a seed, give it away, bury it.

Now I know it's a bit early to talk about planting your garden, particularly here. Although you certainly can start your seeds inside the house. As for outside planting, I've been told you need to wait until mid-June before you get your plants or your seeds in the ground, otherwise, you risk a frozen seed or plant that will do no more than provide compost to your garden. Most of us prefer to have flowers or vegetables and fruits, not compost. But Jesus makes the point that you must give up the seed, you must sacrifice the seed in order to get more fruit, more vegetables or more seed. Grain farmers look for a yield of twenty times or more per seed; or even forty times or more; that is, a simple seed reproduces itself well.

Jesus says he is the seed of life that must be planted, once at the cross, and then again in each of our lives. The cross and the resurrection give enough seed for each of us to have his life in us. And he willingly gives his life for us. Jesus says this as the Savior, but he also says this as a model for each of us to give away our own lives. But what does it mean to give away your life?

First of all, it means to consciously say "yes" to God's mission in your life, to say "yes" to Jesus' way; the way of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. It means caring about what God cares about. It means rightfully getting a sense of who you are.

And here is where John 12:25 causes us, at least it causes me, to wonder what Jesus means. He says, "Those who love their life will lose it while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

We hear a lot about loving in the Bible, and rightly so. God is in the business of re-educating us about love. In our sex-saturated culture, where love is mostly or only about self-fulfillment, God teaches us to love, to give

ourselves to others, to help one another, to be kind to one another, to forgive one another, to open up to one another and risk again being hurt.

The great commandment is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. But many of us don't know how to love. Many of us have mostly been shown a hurtful love, love with huge strings attached, love that ends up in painful betrayal or abandonment. So we bristle at the word "father" or at men. Others among us have been abused by mothers and women. We are broken people. The last statistic I heard on abuse was one in three women have experienced it and one in five men. Of course, these are based on those who are courageous enough to report such incidents.

So when Jesus tells us if we love our lives, we will lose our lives, what is he saying? He wants us to turn away from thinking that life is mostly about getting what we want, about making security here, about building ourselves up, thinking we are better than others, thinking that life is all about me and my rights. If we choose narcissism, that old Greek story of the beautiful boy that fell in love with his reflection in the water, to the point that he went in after it, but forgot he could not swim and drowned in his self-love, if we choose that self as center of the universe, we certainly will drown and miss life as God intended it.

But if we hate our lives in this world...what did Jesus mean by that? He certainly did not mean that we should cultivate self-hatred. Self-hatred is that attitude whereby we constantly run ourselves down, swear at ourselves or abuse ourselves with degrading comments and hurtful self-comments. Some of us do this as a result of the abusive and degrading comments we received as children, whether it was our parents or our siblings or our friends at school who hurt us with their words. These were worse than sticks or stones or fists. Negative tapes continue in many of our heads that God does not want us to carry inside ourselves. Self-hatred that creates an internal environment of disdain and put-downs, usually leads to the same attitudes toward others, whether those others are like us, or whether they are racially or socially or simply different from us.

Jesus is not teaching us to self-hate. He is helping us to receive love, to know how much he gave of himself for us that we could not give to ourselves. He is placing in us enough love that we can give that love away sacrificially, even as the seed gives itself away and as he gives himself away.

Jesus is to have a unique place in our lives that no one and no other thing should take. We worship him as Thomas did after seeing, so we do without seeing.

We therefore have a right perspective on our lives, neither that we are the center of the universe and better than all; nor a worthless so-and-so that is simply about to screw up again. Neither narcissism nor self-hatred is what Jesus is calling us to pursue. Rather we are to follow him. As he acts, so can we. He speaks words of life. He heals. He directs as many as he can to God. He recovers hope. He creatively teaches. He is very observant of all that goes on around him, in the people, in the creation, the environment, the political structures. He sees it all clearly. Yet he keeps God's mission as his focus. And he calls us to the same. He keeps God's good news front and center. We can have a living, vital, transforming, relationship with God in Jesus.

He recognizes there is a great cost to taking this mission seriously. There is a huge cost for him. He knows at some point that he will be killed, perhaps even knowing that he was going to be tortured to death. We don't really know how much he knows about the details of his future, only that he knew he would die a premature death for the mission he was on. He knows that he doesn't want to shrink back or to chicken out at the key moment of his mission. So he courageously goes forward with God and trusts God his Father through whatever may come.

The apostle John in his gospel refers to this critical timing as his hour. Throughout the gospel in the previous eleven chapters, Jesus makes clear that his time had not yet come. In fact at least a couple of times in the Gospel of John he says this, once to his mom in 2:4 when she wanted him to immediately show his miraculous power, once to his brothers in 7:6 who wanted him to immediately show his intentions as the Messiah. Timing is critical in our lives. We only have so much time. We are to use it wisely. We are to tell others about what we experience in gratitude to the God we serve.

So we give ourselves back to God, we ask God for the inner transformation and the healing we need on the inside so that we can serve from a healthy place, not to control others or be controlled by them, not to manipulate others or be manipulated by them, but to let them be and pursue maturity in serving others out of a whole heart. Last week I was saying it's hard to be

holy when you are so full of holes. But in fact, it is through our cracked and broken areas, that God ministers to us through others, so that God in turn can minister to others through us. It is a great mystery, but wonderful when we see God's hand at work. Even when someone chooses to oppose you and tell you how far wrong you have gone can become an opportunity to show how much God has done in your life. I had a fellow write me after the VOWR meditations, telling me how I had maligned the atheists and agnostics by saying they will come under the judgment of God. Of course, he had missed the part that says we all will come under the judgment of God, the just and loving final words on our lives, atheists, agnostics and believers of all kinds, everyone with any higher power or none at all. God has the final eulogy, the final say, the final verdict. Isn't better to choose to say "yes" to God now, rather than in the end when we have no choice in the judgment box?

So I urge you to choose Jesus' way again today. I can't prove any of what I say. I can only point you to the Scriptures and say again that the foolishness of God is wiser than our highest wisdom and the weakness of God is greater than our mightiest strengths. So we walk with Jesus to the cross, serving, loving, healing, and trusting God.

Let us pray.