

“A Glimpse of Green”

John 12:20-33

March 18, 2018

On rare occasions in this life, we are privileged to encounter an extraordinary person. By extraordinary, I mean someone who challenges us; someone who, because they live life differently than most, makes us think hard about how we are living our lives. By extraordinary, I mean someone who makes us stop, causes an interruption, not always welcomed, in our usual flurry of activity and makes us really take stock.

One such extraordinary person in my life was a man I met in prison. Yes, before you find out from someone else, you may as well hear it from me. I spent some time in prison. Actually, it was something of a work-release program. When I would get released from classes at seminary, I would go to work in the prison with a strange little Japanese man who everyone called “Frankie-San.” Some of you may remember that Frankie-San visited us here one time in the early 90’s. Frankie-San surely qualifies as an extraordinary person.

As a Japanese soldier, Frankie-San suffered the terrible humiliation of not dying for the Emperor during World War II. His humiliation was compounded when his shame led him to try several times, unsuccessfully, to kill himself. It was in the depths of his despair that he met Jesus Christ. Through a most peculiar chain of events, he ended up as an English teacher in the Central Correctional Institute in Columbia, S.C. His dark and dilapidated classroom was in the bowels of that huge old prison, like a tomb, far underground, where there was no natural light.

While at seminary, I would go to help him teach remedial reading and writing to the prisoners. I didn’t really want to; it was an awful place, but Frankie was not the kind of person to take “No” for answer. This graying and diminutive man would come for me at the front gate and would lead me down corridor after dark corridor, through gate after iron gate, each of which would slam shut with an unreal finality. He would lead me into the depths of this place, to his dingy little classroom. And there his “students” would be. Some, men who had spent most of their lives there, and some just kids and all functionally illiterate. There would always be one of them in particular that Frankie-San had fingered for special tutoring, usually one of the kids who would be my special assignment. I remember Jimmy in particular who could not have been more than 18 years old. I have no idea why he was there. I learned after my first visit with Frankie not to ask. The first and only time I did ask, Frankie shrugged off my question by saying, “Don’t know. Doesn’t matter. He killed probably a preacher or something!” I suspect young Jimmy was in prison less as a result of any law he had broken and more because no one in his few short years had every really cared much about him, no one, that is, except Frankie. “He writes my Mom for me,” Jimmy told me. “He don’t write too good, but I can’t write at all. And sometimes he just sits with me late at night and we talk about stuff, about God, and stuff like that.”

It has been more than 30 years since I was privileged to first meet Frankie-San, but he remains for me an extraordinary person and the one I think of first whenever I read these words of Jesus from this morning’s gospel:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

There is an incredible secret here, a wonderful mystery that cries out to be understood and before which most people just shake their heads in puzzlement. Frankie-San knows what it is like to be buried in the ground, in the depths of that dark prison. And, by distaining his own

life, by putting aside the comforts and pleasures, by caring more about the lives of other's than he does his own, he has discovered the secret, the mystery of what Jesus meant.

We admire such commitment, don't we, when we see the Frankie-Sans and the Mother Teresa's of this world? We are awed by extraordinary people like these and we shake our heads in wonder over such commitment, over such self-sacrifice. We often recognize in them the extraordinary power of God. But less often do we recognize these words of Jesus, this call to extraordinary service, is spoken not just to these exceptional people, but to you and me. "Not qualified," you say? Remember, as someone has put it so well, God does not call the qualified; he qualifies the called!

This is a call to think about our own lives in a new way. And, listen carefully now, because here is why so few people know the secret or understand the mystery; this is not a legalistic demand from God who insists that we must live a life of service so we can be blessed with good things now and be rewarded with heaven later on. These are not charitable acts you sort of have to do even though you would much rather be doing something enjoyable. Rather what we have here is a truth and a promise which, if taken seriously, can lead us, not to lives of burdensome obligation, but to lives of freedom and joy. It is not, however, the most popular route to those things.

We are caught up in a culture which admires service to others as an ideal and at a distance and counsels us, rather, to look to personal pleasures and material goods as the primary sources of fulfillment and happiness. Someone has suggested that the real formula for happiness is: "Find out what you don't like to do and then, don't do it!" It seems logical enough, this personal and hedonistic approach to happiness. The only thing wrong with it is it doesn't work. It is a big lie! It is a perpetuation of the myth that somehow loving one's own life leads to a life worth loving. It is to this shallow and mistaken understanding of what matters that Jesus speaks these words.

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In other words, if the seed of grain does not "die," it does not fulfill its purpose and, as a single grain, it is virtually worthless. I've seen too many times our friends in Africa who eat the seeds instead of planting them because they are so hungry. Then the seed cannot do its work and they are hungry again. But when the seed "dies," is buried in the ground, miraculous things happen and life is multiplied a thousand times.

Jesus spoke these words as he approached the cross, the place where he would become the seed which dies and is buried in the ground; and which, through that death, has produced miraculous life which is yours and mine for the asking. This morning in the midst of Lent, we get a glimpse of the resurrection, a glimpse of the green blade rising from the seed dead and buried. We catch sight of the secret, the astonishing surprise at the end of the story that we thought we knew. And the surprise ending is that the ending is really the beginning, that life flows from death, that it is from, and only from, the buried grain the green blade rises.

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