

John 12:24-25 (Lent 5; Year B)

March 17, 2024

John 12:24-25

Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Psalm 119:33-40

Teach me, O LORD, the way of your intentions, and I will observe them to the end. Give me understanding, that I may follow after you with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your guidance, for my delight is there.

Turn my heart to your desires, and not to selfish gain.  
Turn my eyes from the vane images around us; give me life in your ways.  
Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who honour you.  
Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good.

See, I long to walk in your ways; in your righteousness give me life.

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Psalm 119

Live Well to Die Well

[Fifth Sunday of Lent slide from Vanderbilt collection]

The lectionary texts for this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent come from John 12 and Psalm 119. The section of John 12 which Shenyce read made me think of a Julian Taylor song I have heard on the radio in recent years called S.E.E.D.S. Here is the first verse and refrain.

Now here you are, you're in full flower  
You're flexible in all your power  
You've got all the sunlight and the air that you need  
They tried to bury us but they didn't know we were seeds

Now here you stand hour after hour  
Strong as an oak, tall as a tower  
The storm keeps on raging. But you never pay no heed

They tried to bury us but they didn't know we were seeds

Chorus:

Somehow Everything Eventually Dreams Someday  
Somehow Everyone Eventually Dreams Someday

In an interview Julian says, "I remember waking up to a text that my cousin, Ajika, sent me. It was the morning after the announcement in Kamloops where 215 uncovered remains of buried Indigenous children were discovered at a former residential school. Her text simply read: "George Floyd and Kamloops" with a tear emoji, and, following that, "They tried to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds." Both events were about a year apart and weighed heavily on my heart, mind, and soul."<sup>1</sup>

The phrase comes from 20<sup>th</sup> century poet Dinos Christianopoulos who was facing censorship from his Greek literary community. It might have had to do with his politics. It might have had to do with his expressed gender. It might have been jealousy. We don't know for sure. What we do know is that in response to the professional isolation and social persecution he penned the words, "They tried to bury us; They didn't know we were seeds". I will just say this: if you are brave enough to persecute poets or prophets you better be prepared for significant artistic blowback. From tiny seeds, we can expect mighty changes.<sup>2</sup>

Those who know the soil know the truth that from small seeds amazing things happen. I put my compost into the soil and tomatoes unplanted by me grow. Seeds which have been in dormancy for years, nay decades, come to life in the ground. Seeds are resilient. For those who see their loved ones buried, and feel buried themselves, this is of some consolation.

Jesus, man of the land, knew the viability of seeds to be true. And of lives. Consider those people who have shaped us into who we currently are. Sure, some of them are living but many have returned to the earth which receives us all. Some have been "disappeared". In short, many of the people who have contributed to who we have become are no longer with us. And yet the seeds which they have planted in our lives continue to inspire us and guide us. Jesus included.

The Jesus seed has inspired many souls who have sacrificed their lives for the greater dignity of conscience and community. Think here of Martyrs Mirror, those named in this or that book who have taken the low road of the earth believing that such was in the right and might offer great yields. Sometimes it happens in the same decade. And sometimes the seeds lie dormant for a season or two or twelve. Each of us plants seeds as we go along in our living and dying. If there is just one

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.popmatters.com/julian-taylor-seeds-premiere-interview>

<sup>2</sup> [On the Origins of "They Tried to Bury Us, They Didn't Know We Were Seeds" \(hyperallergic.com\)](#)

seed to be planted or nurtured, it is the love seed. God is love. We are loved. We are lovable despite our imperfections. We are invited to radiated love among us and around us.

We all will, after all, die. We are mortal. We are terminal. Even the most noble among us will die. The quality of our living translates into the quality of our dying. And that takes me to our second scripture of the morning: Psalm 119. It is a lesson, I think, of how we might live well and plant good seeds.

A professor of mine in undergraduate school had a fabulous sense of humour and vibrant faith. We studied together mid week and worshipped together at the college church on the weekends. He began his semester by reminding we students of the portion of scripture from Psalm 119 (vv 99-100) which reads: “I am wiser than all my teachers...I have more understanding than the aged.” Believe it and live into it, he told us. He was a history professor and occasional theologian.

At 176 verses, Psalm 119 is the longest of all the Psalms. It is a grand litany encouraging us to live and worship well, offered with exquisite literary beauty. It is an acrostic, which means that each new section of the Psalm begins with another sequential letter in a series of letters. In this case, the sequence is the entirety of the Hebrew alphabet; it is all here, they were saying. The first stanza begins with an Aleph and the last stanza begins with Taw. The stanzas are the same length. What changes from strophe to strophe is the word for the Torah.<sup>3</sup> Eight different words for God’s gift for noble living, the Torah, are used throughout the grand poem of Psalm 119. Oh, some translators make the effort to harmonize the differences by using two or three words for God’s Torah, but I find that a reduction of creativity. Torah, wisdom, compassion-- they come in a variety of expressions. When linked to our reading from John 12 about seeds and death and fruit bearing, I have several thoughts.

First, faith filled living and worship comes in a variety of forms. Eight different words for the Torah; maybe eight different expressions of service to God. Plowman, scholar, poet, preacher; physician, psychologist, parent and accountant. All are spaces of living into God’s Torah. We are invited to live the wisdom whatever our place in this world. Seeds are planted as we go. Sometimes this will mean compassion and sometimes this will mean accountability. Do the best as you can. Reflect. Modify as necessary. Try again—be it with client, child, customer or congregant. There are at least eight ways of expressing the Torah, the way of deeper living, within Psalm 119. Which expression is yours??

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<sup>3</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reyrburn, *A Handbook On Psalms* in the UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1981), pp .

Secondly, the living of God's grace in our words and deeds will appear differently in unique stages of our lifespan. There are distinct opportunities and challenges which come with being a youth. There are unique opportunities and challenges which come with being a parent. There are openings which afford themselves to those unmarried or without children. Retirees and Grand-parents have a whole new venue—a position of respect as elders and source of love. Plant good seeds and trust the Great Gardener to do the rest. Plant love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness-- plant all those fruits of the spirit. There is no one "right" profession. There are a multitude of gifts which emerge through teaching, healing, creating and so forth. What makes our daily activities a faithful reflection of our Creator and Christ is the quality in which we live into our daily activities. Stop: consider your station in life. What are your challenges and opportunities?

Finally, we are invited to creativity. I am not aware of a more intentionally crafted Psalm than 119. The care which went into each line, stanza and strophe is amazing. Whether we are pastor or parishioner, this Psalm invites us to live beautifully. There is a kindness with which we can greet our neighbour. There is a gentleness with which we can send our email and text messages. There is a way in which each of us, in our own places of life, might creatively plant seeds which will bear fruit. Think of your house mates. Think of those in the apartment complex. Think of those down the block. Creative expressions of care are a form of worship Psalm 119 would completely endorse.

Finally, this Psalm was intended for public worship. Hebrews 10:25 encourages the young church to meet together regularly. Who reads Psalm 119 on their own? Unless it is imminent, who talks about death around their supper table? Where, if not in the faith community, do we ponder creative expressions of our faith?? Where? This is where. This is the place where we pool our ignorance, lick our wounds, eat the bread of angels (Ps 78:25), and inspire each other. Psalm 119 reminds us not only of diversity, not only creativity, but also collectivity. Worship and reflection together is good for us. At least that has been the position of the early church and those people who shaped it.

We are grateful for our friends this day who have joined us. We are grateful for the scriptures which have fed us. We are grateful for the music which has inspired us. Let us be creative. Let us be rooted in God. Let us be sustained by God's people. Amen.