

with so many sons and daughters of God that no one would ever want for bread again. Only in order to do that, the seed had to be planted. It had to die, or it would never grow.

If Jesus had saved his life, gone on a speaking tour, and written some books, there is no telling how long his movement might have lasted—a hundred years, maybe, or at least until the books fell apart. But because he was willing to lose his life—because his message mattered so much to him that he was willing to show people what it meant instead of just telling them about it—his seed bore much fruit, more than it ever did while he was alive.

Because Jesus was willing to die, God could raise him from the dead. Because Jesus was willing to die, people could discover that death was not the worst thing that could happen to them. Because Jesus was willing to die, a new community could form in his name, one that redefined its life on the basis of his death.

One of the main points in that redefinition was a new view of suffering. It was no longer something to be avoided at all costs, nor did it mean that God was mad at you. It might in fact mean that God loved you very much, because when someone on a path toward God deliberately chooses the self-offering that goes with that path, then suffering becomes one of God's most powerful tools for transformation. It is how God breaks open hard hearts so that they may be made new. It is how God cracks open closed lives so that they can get some air into them again.

When Jesus died, this power was made manifest. By absorbing into himself the worst that the world could do to a child of God and by refusing to do any of it back, he made sure it was put to death with him. By suffering every kind of hurt and shame without ever once letting them deflect him from his purpose, he broke their hold on humankind. In him, sin met its match. He showed us what is possible. These are just some of the fruits of Christ's death, things that could never have happened if he had not been willing to fall to the ground.

So here we sit, the local field of wheat who owe our lives to him. If he had not died, we would not be here. Because he did, we are. He has spoken to us about the way of life and the way of death, letting us know that these are the only two choices and that none of us may abstain. When the hour comes, each of us has a grain of wheat with which to cast our votes. It is the grain of our lives, and all of creation is holding its breath to see what we will do with it. Amen.

**John 12:20-33.** Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.'" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for our sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

### **'Unless a Grain Falls'**

Barbara Brown Taylor

Last week a woman came to see me for some help with her power bill. After I handed her the check, she said, "what kind of church is this, anyway?" I told her it was an Episcopal church, which did not appear to help her any. "I never heard of that before," she said. "What do y'all believe?" I started to tell her, but she had specific things in mind. "Do you believe you have to be saved?" she asked me. While I was trying to decide whether to give her the long answer or the short answer, she said, "Let me put it this way" Do you believe Jesus died for your sins?"

"Of course," I said, and while she still looked a little sorry for me, as if she knew I was saying something I did not fully understand, she decided to let me pass. "Well, so do I," she said, tucked the check in her pocketbook, and left.

That was the end of it for her, but not for me. By asking me about the connection between my life and Jesus' death, she opened up all the old uncomfortable questions for me again. Yes, I believe Christ died for the sins of the whole world—only how did that work, exactly? Were they all piled up there at the foot of the cross, sins past and sins to come, and when he breathed his last they simply vanished?

Or was it more like a ledger in the hands of an angry God, with every person's name followed by a long list of debts? Every time

God wrote down another one, God said, "Someone is going to have hell to pay for this." Then one day Jesus said, "I will. I'll pay the whole thing," and that was that. God closed the book and threw it in the trash. Only how did something that happened two thousand years ago affect what I may do tomorrow? Does Jesus go on dying for our sins? And what kind of God would require that?

Since Christ's death and resurrection are central to this faith we profess, I think it is extremely important that each of us struggle with what those events mean to us, both as individuals and as a community. It is not enough to repeat what we have been told. If we really believe there is a connection between our lives and Christ's death, then the least we can do is spend some quiet hours asking God to teach us about that.

The twelfth chapter of John contains most of what Jesus had to say about his own death in that Gospel. According to John, he said it in Jerusalem during Passover, the last week of his life, when some Greeks who were in town for the festival asked to see Jesus. Their request was a sign to him that his hour had come.

These were not local people who had heard about him from their neighbors. They were Gentiles from across the sea who wanted to meet the Hebrew holy man. When the authorities heard about it, they would step up their efforts to arrest him. The more famous he became, the more dangerous he was to them. Something had to be done about him, and soon.

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," Jesus told them, and not only them but the whole crowd standing around. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit," he said.

It is a statement about the redemptive power of suffering, both his and ours, and it is no easier to hear now than it ever was. What he is telling us is that if we do everything in our power to protect our lives the way they are—if we successfully prevent change, prevent conflict, prevent pain—then at the end we will find that we had no life at all. But if we hate our lives in this world, which as far as I am concerned can only mean if we hate all the ways we cheapen our lives by chasing comfort, safety, and superiority in this world—if we hate that our lives in this world, which as far as I am concerned can only mean if we hate all the ways we cheapen our lives by chasing comfort, safety, and superiority in this world—if we hate that enough

to stop it and start chasing God instead—then there will be no end to the abundance of our lives.

Those were the two choices he laid out for his listeners, the same two available to him as the net drew in around him. The first way, the way of self-protection, was closed to suffering. If he chose it, he could do a couple of things. He could stop walking around in the open and go underground instead, sleeping in a different hideout each night. Or he could simply tone down his message. That would work too. He could find more pleasant ways to phrase things. He could stop eating with outcasts and start showing more respect for organized religion. If he loved his life and wanted to save it, that is.

If, on the other hand, he loved something more than his life, then there was a second way open to him. Call it the way of self-offering. That way contained not only the possibility but the probability of suffering—not as the main goal but as a by-product of the main goal. If he kept walking around in the open where anyone could get to him, if he kept speaking and living his confrontational message, then eventually he would suffer for it. There were no two ways about it. He was crossing lives of power you do not cross without getting electrocuted. His only choice was whether to cross them or not.

But he did have a choice, which is essential to his story. There are so many kinds of suffering in this world that have nothing to do with the gospel. There is nothing redemptive about famine, genocide, or incest. There is no choice for those who suffer from such things, and no one should have to endure them. The only kind of suffering I am talking about today is the kind Jesus chose—again, not as his goal but as a by-product of his goal—which was to be fully who God had created him to be no matter what it cost.

A grain of wheat cannot grow unless it dies. That is how Jesus put it. If you encase it in plastic and hang it around your neck, it will never be good for anything but a bauble. For the seed to do what it was meant to do, it has to be given up. It has to fall into the earth and be buried. It has to sit down there in the dark until its hour comes, when it will swell, crack, and hatch new life—a green shoot that will climb toward the sun until it breaks through, becoming a golden stalk of wheat that bears much fruit. If you dig around in its roots looking for the seed, you won't find it anymore. It is dead and gone. It gave up its life so there could be more wheat in the world. .... This is a very different understanding of Jesus' death than the one most of us were taught, which was that Jesus died to atone for our sins. According to John, Jesus died to fill the world with wheat,