**Everything Grows** Rev. Phillip J. Romine
Fifth Sunday in Lent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
John 12:20-33 Saint Paul, Minnesota
March 17, 2024

My mentor and seminary professor, Paul Capetz, passed on some wisdom from his own time in seminary. And like we are all encouraged to do, I offer it to you: a seed of a thought, to cast aside, to ponder, to plant, to water with prayer:

“There is no such thing as a problem-free theology. The question is, which problems are you willing to live with?”

One of the inheritances of the Protestant Reformation is that our otherworldly ideas have come to take priority over our this-worldly actions. There are justified reasons for this. Martin Luther especially, had a problem with the idea that God’s grace could only be accessed through an often hypocritical, violent, money-obsessed institution like the Christian church of his day. Luther, at least in his early days, reasoned that assuring Christians of God’s salvation for them in the next life would free them to focus their energies more on loving and serving their neighbors in this life.

But, ironically for us Protestants, the notion of securing a seat at the heavenly table has come to dominate our worldly attention. And rather than uniting us in love, service, and solidarity with the world as Luther had hoped, it has given rise to the justification to try and colonize the world to worship—not the God we say we serve—but rather this specific idea we’ve inherited about God.

Take, for instance, most of the way the gospel of John is interpreted. I suspect most of us know this gospel best not from today’s passage, but from the popularization of the 3rd chapter, 16th verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Biblical scholar Jimmy Hoke points out that the broader passage in which John 3:16 is situated “carries forward assumptions about good and evil, race and class, faith and truth that were perpetuated [not by the best ethics and practices of Jewish traditions of the day, but] by Roman imperial ideology.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This chapter and verse, and the antagonism of John’s gospel in its day against “the children of darkness” generally and the Jewish people in particular: these are feeding present-day movements of white supremacy, Christian nationalism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and the host of hate-fueled leaders who are drunk on the delusion that they are gods among men.

As Christians in a particular time and place, just like our ancestors: we have choices. Our Scriptures are not self-revealing: much as they sometimes try, as even today’s text does when it reads, “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” Scripture does not interpret itself, once and for all, finally and fully. We, limited, intelligent, imperfect, and beautiful human beings: we live with them, they come to us in historical and cultural contexts unlike those in which they were born, and we make choices about how we interpret and use them.

We can choose to interpret our Scriptures in ways that only benefit our groups, our families, our citizens, our interests. And if we do, it is my conviction that our problems of perpetual violence, hate, oppression, and ignorance will persist.

With the beautiful and fleeting gift of life God has given us, what problems might we exchange for our present divisions and desecrations? What might happen if we allow our dried-up inheritance of in-group superiority, in this life or the next, to run its course, and take its rest at the end of a weary life?

In exchange for a narrowed understanding of eternal life after death for me, for my people, we could instead wrestle with the complexity of working with God, confident in the recurring biblical theme that God keeps God’s promises, to make this limited, beautiful life more beautiful for more of creation. Such an exchange could free us, free us of the need to justify our personal, political, or religious superiority and focus instead on joining in the efforts to heal, mend, tend, and nourish the world all of us inherited and all of us steward. We could exchange a narrow sense of a here-after heaven for a chosen few…for a broader, messier, more nuanced, more realistic, more beautiful sense of working toward heaven in the here and now, for ever more people. Perhaps this is how we might understand Jesus when he says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Such an exchange comes at a cost. Don’t others have to be wrong in order for me to be right? It certainly feels like our very souls might hang in the balance. But “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.”[[4]](#footnote-4) We need not abandon our hope of life beyond death altogether; rather we can grasp in it a seed that might bear much fruit: to expand the hope of a better life beyond our present life for all people, in this world and the world to come.

Instead of jockeying for position to prove ourselves the best, the truest, the purest of Jesus’ followers, we might see ourselves more in the curious Greeks, looking outward and locking arms with others who “wish to see Jesus:”[[5]](#footnote-5) with those who are resurrecting hope in places of despair; with those who are healing hurts on broken bodies and in traumatized souls; with those who are offering wisdom that connects rather than divides.

Such an exchange puts a premium on the collective quality of life for everyone, at the expense of temporary comfort for some. And joining with others to repair the world also means coming to terms with the fullness of our history: that some of our cultural and spiritual ancestors perpetrated the very harms we are now called to repair. Perhaps this is 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.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Perhaps we may yet grow beyond long-withered interpretations of our Scriptures by taking them seriously in our time, rather than narrowly reading them according to the standards of times long gone: By having the audacity to say that they proclaim life, and life abundant,[[7]](#footnote-7) for all of God’s creation; By acknowledging that John’s attempt to secure salvation for the early Jesus followers beyond the Jewish covenant, brought with it a binary of good and evil that has wrought its own evil in past and current ages. Perhaps, as a church reformed and always reforming according to God’s word, even this meandering, maligned, and misunderstood gospel might yet be put to use in the repair of a world it has harmed.

Perhaps some of us will hear this invitation as mere thunder; others as the voice of an angel.[[8]](#footnote-8) Either way, it matters for whose sake we choose to hear God’s invitation: is it for a chosen few to escape an idea of hell, or is it for all creation to experience a reality of heaven: God’s kingdom, God’s embrace, the New Jerusalem, descending in our midst, arising anew among us?

My prayer is that, as we are invited to renew our baptisms, we hear God’s call to be born anew, of water and spirit,[[9]](#footnote-9) to do what we are supposed to do with long-overripe, withering, dried up fruits of wisdom from our past: harvest the viable seeds, cure them, then plant them. Just as our ancestors did, and just as our Scripture this morning reminds us, so that they may bear much fruit: for us, for all of us. May it be so, Amen.

1. John 3:16. Perhaps the only verse that has done MORE to advance the ideas of Christianity as the only “true” religion ALSO appears in John: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Note, simply, that Jesus is NOT talking about any kind of institutional religion, nor was John writing in a context in which institutional Christianity had taken any kind of noticeable root in broader civil life. Even if John’s intent carried significant anti-Jewish sentiment, the focus was on Jesus as the killed and risen Christ as the connection to God, not the orthodoxy nor the orthopraxy of a community of believers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dr. Jimmy Hoke, *Queering the Lectionary*, commentary on John 3:14-21 (<https://www.patreon.com/posts/just-gimme-march-99624777?utm_medium=post_notification_email&utm_campaign=patron_engagement&utm_source=post_link&token=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJyZWRpc19rZXkiOiJpYTI6MDkxZmE5MWQtMTRjZi00YWFiLTlhNjktNzhkOTE0MjUwYzllIiwicG9zdF9pZCI6OTk2MjQ3NzcsInBhdHJvbl9pZCI6NDQyNjc5NjZ9.mmYeTWHYuIeFRyt_FXX2dpuT0mCvSN1dhaXM2iWUMPw>, accessed 3/8/24). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 12:32 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John 12:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John 12:21 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John 12:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John 10:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John 12:29-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John 3:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)