

The Grain of Wheat

Years of listening to Jesus in the gospels slide by and one day it finally occurs to us that Jesus hardly ever gives a straight answer. He is always inviting people into the Kingdom; but when someone finally asks him, "What is this Kingdom you are always talking about?" we see him pause. He thinks for a moment and says, "Well, it's like a man who had two sons . . .," or "It's like a man who was blind and who was given his sight." Jesus is always telling stories, suggesting images that hint at more than can be said. As I notice this I start to picture the response of people. I can see some of them stop short, knowing there is something there in the image or the parable, though they can't say what it is. Quietly they open their hearts to what Jesus has said and they go away pondering it. I see them going back to it year after year, "The Kingdom is like a man in search of fine pearls . . ." Gradually this changes their hearts. The reality of the Kingdom starts to seep into their lives as they live within the story. Years later someone, seeing something of the depth that had grown in them, might ask them, "What happened to you?" They would pause, think for a moment and say, "Well, it's like a man who had two sons . . ."

In John 12:24 Jesus uses one of these images to speak of his death.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

I know that it is time to take this image into my heart and let it work on me, but I'm afraid. I just don't want to open my heart to the confusion, the pain, the dying. I try to hide from it, but I can't. After days of putting it off, somewhere deep inside me I finally give in and I am at peace.

I sit down and open the gospels. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies..." I feel myself falling, disoriented. My world is slipping away from me, and much that was so important seems unreal. My work that seemed so important, I leave it behind. It is gone. My hopes that I could make something of myself, they, too, are gone. My plans! I've always been making plans, planning what I would finish today, what I would tackle next month. Now, it's hard to tell why that seemed so important. I experience them drying up before my eyes. I'm left without things to do, things to achieve. I look for those I love. They can't touch me. I seem to be falling beyond the reach of their loving care. Nor can I get back to them. I still hold them in my heart, but something is gone. I can't quite make out what it is. The words come to me, "It's over, done."

The world goes on; but I won't. What will happen to those I love? I don't know. Terribly aware of their needs and fragility, I have to let them go. What will happen to me? Again, I don't know. I have to entrust those I love and myself to the Father, and here there is no longer any room for pretense. Faced with my own collapsing limits I either trust the Father unconditionally or I panic. The terror that we are all alone in the universe comes back to me, and I am defenseless before it. Then the Father's love touches my heart and I give it back to him; I know he is there and will save me. Here my surrender is without affectation; there is nothing I can give him, no achievement I can hide behind. I'm stripped and exposed but not unloved.

Dimly I had thought that this would be ravaging. Instead I find it is just numbing. I really don't understand. I don't even try to. I sit here stunned, confused, but trusting. In this numbed silence I look to the crucifix.¹ My heart tries to embrace the Crucified One, as never before. With crystal clarity I see Jesus. He is what I have always needed to be: the Beloved of God, the Guiltless One, trusting, totally simple, a man for others. Now I see that because he was all of that without reservation or apology he had to die. In a rush of confusion and resentment I see what I have never let myself see: that he had to die for me. I had to kill him. He is so clearly what I desperately need to be but have always been blocked from being. In the depth of my heart I have never fully believed I was the Father's beloved; there has always been the brooding ground of guilt in me. The roots of my selfishness have blocked my simplicity and trust. Flooded by all of this, that I have spent years trying to leave behind as I journeyed with Jesus, I lash out at what I'm not. The deep reservoirs of my fear and guilt break over me as I stand before Pilate and beneath the cross screaming in rage. I kill him.

I can't bear him, and yet I love him. Caught off guard and overwhelmed by this explosion that has brought to the surface the roots of my sinfulness, I cannot believe that the Father could love me.² Not while I kill his Beloved Son. My dark side takes over, and I embrace it even while I hate it and myself. I find myself cut off, isolated. My fear and resentment distort my heart turning me against others, God and myself. I'm trapped. I live the isolation of the grain of wheat that refuses to die. I'm sterile. I remember my past fidelities, the years of faithful prayer, my journeys with Jesus through different wildernesses, my growing ability to serve and be simple. Now it all rings hollow. Others might be

gradually healed by God's love in this way, but the true state of my heart has been revealed in this outburst. I see clearly the dark underside of my past fidelity. It was self-serving. In the midst of all this I would cry out to the Lord for help, but I open my heart and I cannot speak. I'm paralyzed. I am being killed by the same terror that rose up in me to kill Jesus.

I look back to the Crucified One and see that even in his agony and death his arms are out to embrace me. My heart dissolves. Welling up out of me come the words of the centurion, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk. 15:39). This is the great pouring out of God's love. Only the Crucified One can reveal to me the depth of human darkness, my darkness, and the extent to which God embraces it, embraces me. I had fled from the cross, hidden from it any way I could. Here inside this image of the grain of wheat, I find that my only safety is clinging to the Crucified One.

If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also . . . (John 12:26).

This had sounded like a dreadful challenge, now it is my only hope.

¹Readers of Sebastian Moore's *The Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger*. N.Y.: Seabury, 1977, will be able to see how deeply I have been influenced by that book, even though I do not quote it here.

²This has certain similarities with what John of the Cross calls the dark night of spirit passive. See *Dark Night*, II, 4-8.