

Unless a Grain of Wheat

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International Christian Fellowship of Oulu

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by Fritz Rienecker & Gerhard Maier

Conversations with and picture by Hanna Fähnrich



Dear all who are gathered here in St. Luke's Chapel!

I'd like to begin this sermon by reading today's Bible text, which is taken from John 12:20-26. It tells us about the festive occasion of Passover, when Jesus had triumphantly entered Jerusalem. Many people in Jerusalem had welcomed Jesus; they were cheering Him on, shouting "Hosanna" and yet wondering about this man. Both Jews and Gentiles were puzzled and amazed by Him, and tried to find out who He was and what He had come for: *"Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."*

Dear congregation!

In a few days we will be celebrating "Thanksgiving", just like so many people in the world, especially in North America. "Thanksgiving" originated in the European agricultural and farming tradition. In ancient and modern times people gathered after the harvest to give thanks for a good crop. They rejoiced together that their work had yielded good results, and they gave thanks for all of this as blessings received from God. "Thanksgiving" thus has its origins in an agricultural and farming custom. It brings to mind hard work such as ploughing the soil and sowing the seeds - wheat seeds for example. Perhaps it also brings to mind the labour of harvesting, the threshing and sorting out of wheat grains, separating them from chaff and straw, as well as milling the wheat grains into flour and baking bread out of this flour.

During "Thanksgiving" we are also reminded that each harvest our farmers have to take away a few samples of the best wheat grains, and sow them again into the soil next spring, thereby hoping and working for another good harvest in the forthcoming year. Apart from remembering our farmers' labourious efforts that are required to produce a good crop, "Thanksgiving" also involves God. In fact, it involves foremostly God. On Thanksgiving Day we should remember that God is the giver of life and that He grants strength to work to farmers and all human beings. Moreover, God provides the mercies of sunshine and rain. He provides the soil, into which the wheat grains are sown. He causes the seeds to grow and eventually produce a good crop. Thus, above all, we should keep in mind and be thankful for the fact that God is granting the blessings of life, a good harvest and plenty of bread.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear visitors in our fellowship!

The Bible is full of texts which help us remember God and rely on God in our earthly lives. As a matter of fact, the Bible reveals that everything and everyone we have, and all that we may be or become in this life and the next, is thanks to Him, Him alone. The Bible reveals this to us at times by means of figurative language that is taken from and draws its meaning from agriculture and farming. A few minutes ago we read in today's Bible text that Jesus uses this kind of language when talking about Himself. Let us remember that the people in Jerusalem were puzzled by His triumphal entry. They were wondering who this man was. Jesus spoke in figurative language, and addressed His disciples, as recorded in John 12:24: *"Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."*

What does this Bible verse and saying of Jesus mean? We understand that on this occasion in Jerusalem, Christ was figuratively telling His disciples Who He was and what He had come for. He told His disciples about His death and resurrection by comparing Himself to a dying kernel of wheat eventually producing much fruit. From Scripture we obtain the understanding that Jesus came into this world to give Himself for our behalf. He died, so to say, in the dark earth of this world like a grain of wheat, and we know through the Bible that indeed Christ bears much fruit and yields good harvest in everyone who trusts in Him. This has been shown to us since Jesus lived among us. It is being shown to us through the works of the Holy Spirit, and it will be shown by the second coming of Christ.

The Word of God actually says that Jesus is the Seed [*with a capital S*], which was originally promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 24:7) and is now available to us. In Galatians 3:16 we read that the ancient promises which were once given to Abraham have been and are being and will be fulfilled in Christ: *"The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ."* And yet Scripture also mentions that, if we die to ourselves - that is, to sin and this world or rather the sinful life this world offers - then Christ will gain ground in us. Indeed, He will be planted in us, and we shall become part of Him, and thus partake of His Seed. Galatians 3:29 confirms this: *"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."* Through Jesus we may also bear much fruit and yield a good harvest, as it is promised to us in John 15:5: *"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."*

Yet there is another option! We have the option of not letting Christ die and give His life for us – and if we do not let Him do this for us, He cannot produce any fruit in us and through us. The Bible confirms that we cannot produce lasting fruit without Jesus. According to John 15:4-5: *"Apart from Christ we cannot bear fruit. Apart from Him we can do nothing."* Indeed, reading carefully through Scripture we are told that, if we stay apart from Jesus and thus remain in sin and merely live from the things offered in this wicked world, then we are *"like chaff that the wind blows away"* (Psalms 1:4). Let's remember that chaff is the thing that is eventually sorted out from the wheat grain and thrown away or burnt. So this is the option that we have apart from Christ: to be like chaff and not bear fruit in any way, at least not the kind of fruit that will last.

The Word of God speaks even more directly to us about this, as we can read from Isaiah 40:23-25 (compare with Isaiah 33:10-12 and Hosea 13:3, for these verses apply the things said here also to Israel and generally to all peoples and human beings): *"The Lord brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a*

whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.” Moreover, [Luke 3:17](#) refers to the Day of God’s Wrath or Judgement Day, thereby expressing the same tragic consequence of staying apart from Christ (see also [Matthew 3:12](#), [Zephaniah 2:2](#)): *“The Lord’s winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”*

Dear congregation!

I’m convinced that the option just mentioned shouldn’t be an option for us, because by clinging to the life of this sinful world we will surely perish. Whereas when we let Christ die for us and give us a new life, Jesus enables us to bear much fruit and yield a good crop ([John 15:5](#)). This, however, also involves the need to die to ourselves and to the sin in us and in large parts to the things of this world. Today’s Bible reading ([John 12:25-26](#)) puts it clearly in the words of Jesus: *“Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”*

This means that we should die to our own selfish will and to the things we sometimes desperately want and thereby turn into our gods. Instead we should surrender our will to God and trust His will for our lives. We can live our lives for God thanks to the redemptive work of Jesus. [1 Peter 1:17-19](#) reads that *“it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that we were redeemed from the empty way of life (...), but with the precious blood of Christ”*. [Romans 7:4](#) says: *“So, my brothers and sisters, you died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.”*

As followers of Christ we are thus called to *“show ourselves as disciples”* ([John 15:8](#)) by producing *“fruit that lasts”* ([John 15:16](#)). Following Jesus means to *“live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work.”* ([Colossians 1:10](#)). This means, perhaps above all, to follow Christ’s example in giving in to God’s will. It even means experiencing pain and suffering for a little while, because we need to die to ourselves and our own selfish will. Yet at the very same time we can experience the joy resulting from conforming to God’s will and becoming more like Christ, also in regard to His glorious resurrection and eternal life. We need to die like Christ did. We need to be kernels of wheat, and as we do so we notice with thankfulness that out of us grows – through Jesus – new life and a harvest that will be a blessing for ourselves and others. This new life will be a testimony to God’s glory.

I wish to conclude this sermon by saying that, in my understanding, our best and most convincing testimony as followers of Christ is to surrender our own will and live according to God’s will. Living according to God’s will essentially means to listen to and obey God’s Word. God’s Word, by the way, is also referred to as a *“seed”* ([Luke 8:11](#)) in the Biblical account of Jesus’ *Parable of the Sower* ([Luke 8:1-15](#)). Moreover, the Bible tells us that Christ Himself also means the Word of God ([John 1:1](#)) and Seed ([Galatians 3:16](#)), as we’ve learned earlier in this sermon. The good harvest which is surely coming out of this Seed and which is yielded by following Christ and being obedient to God’s Word, is that our own faith in Jesus will gradually grow ([Colossians 1:10](#)). For other people and especially for God and His glory this means that *“the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world”* ([Colossians 1:6](#)).

Keith Green has voiced all of this in his song *“Make my Life a Prayer to You”* by singing: *“I wanna die and let you give / Your life to me so I might live / And share the hope you gave to me / The love that set me free.”* Keith Green is a good example of a man who tried to surrender his own will and live his life according to the will of God. Keith Green was a musician who found Christ after a long

and painful struggle through false spiritual pathways. Once he had found the Answer to his spiritual search in the person of Jesus Christ, nothing could turn him back. He became one of the most powerful gospelsingers of our time, singing of his wonderful Saviour to those far and near. He and his wife Melody opened their home to those who needed help. They had so many people in need living with them at one point, that they bought a few houses. Keith Green also gave his music cassettes free to those who could not afford to buy them. In the end he really did become like a kernel of wheat that falls into the earth. He died with his two of his children in a tragic plane accident at the age of twentyeight. But his music ministry just went on growing after this. Yes – *“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds”* (John 12:24).

Amen.