

This week I read an interesting article in *Presbyterians Today* about something called the *Death Café* movement. I'll admit when I saw the headline for the article I thought it sounded kind of weird. The two words didn't even make sense together. But as I read the article it became clear: the Death Café movement is a response to a part of our culture that wants to ignore the fact that we all do die eventually. As technology has allowed for life to be prolonged there seems to be no room to talk about death, about aging, about any of the natural processes that happen as a result of our being finite human beings.

According to the *Presbyterians Today* article, the Death Café movement was started by Jon Underwood in England in 2010. His purpose was to give people a place to have open conversations about death—not as grief support, but as a way to talk about death as inevitable and decide how to want to live the life there is. We often hear death talked about as a battle to be won, as an end to our lives, rather than a transition which, as Christians, we believe it to be. The PCUSA's *Brief Statement of Faith* we proclaim that *in life and death we belong to God*. The Death Café movement might be a way to help people live into death rather than fearing it or resisting it. Not that we want it to come any sooner than it needs to, but just that it will come, and that's ok; let's acknowledge that so that when it does come, to us, to our loved ones, we're ready.

Now, I'm not here to advocate for the Death Café movement. I would have to look into it more closely before I did that; but in light of the fact that it's Lent and we're moving toward a death that has special significance for us I thought it was an interesting concept that has real implications for how we might use Lent to think about life and death.

In our scripture for today we're back to this notion of "eternal life" which I confessed last week that I still find mysterious and hard to understand. And maybe that isn't the point—understanding what eternal life is; perhaps trying to *understand* it, to *know* what it is, isn't what we're supposed to do.

We begin with some Greeks. They come to Philip wanting to meet Jesus. Philip goes to Andrew and together they go to Jesus and tell him that some Greeks want to meet him. And that is the last we hear of the Greeks, because Jesus begins one of the long speeches that he is known for in John, a speech that doesn't seem to have anything to do with the Greeks.

One of the interesting things about the gospel of John, one of the things that sets it apart from the other gospels, is the tendency of Jesus to give long speeches to explain who he is and why he has come. We also find little bits of commentary interspersed with the words of Jesus just to help us along the way. Jesus begins by saying that *the time has come for the son of Man to be glorified* and then a short parable: *unless a single grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies it stays a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit*. We all know this to be true: seeds are inert until they're in the soil; then they "die" and a new plant is formed which eventually bears whatever fruit it is meant to have.

By pairing these two sentences together Jesus is linking the glory of the Son of Man to a seed dying and bearing fruit. As he has been identified as the son of Man, at least to us and to the disciples, he is linking himself to the dying and rebirth of the seed. His glory then will be revealed in a dying and rebirth, of sorts.

He then goes on to say that whoever loves their life lose it and those who hate their lives in this world will keep life for eternity. (there it is, that sneaky eternal life!) And that those who serve him must follow him. I've always thought that *following* Jesus meant doing as he did, and in a sense that's true; however, I think it also means that the truth of our following means a death and rebirth as well. Not just doing as Jesus did but turning away from our lives in this world and toward a life rebirthed or renewed in Jesus the Christ.

A key phrase here is 'in this world' and we know it's key because a few verses later he speaks of the 'judgement of this world' and the driving out of the 'ruler of this world'. This world, which we should not think of as the good creation that came from God in the beginning, is represented by the word *Cosmos* and can be thought of as the broken places that are separate from God, alienated from God and set against God's purposes. This, in reformed or Calvinist theology is the *fallen* world. The world that is tainted by sin and as such by suffering and death. In our reality it can be seen as being embodied by the establishments and systems of this world that seek not the good of humanity but the imprisonment of humanity. The ruler of this *cosmos* holds us in thrall, whispering in our ears that no one cares about us but us; that it's *us* against *them* (whoever 'them' is), that life's a bitch and then you die so you might as well get yours while the getting is good.

We all know this. We all know that life in this world is far from perfect, that we suffer greatly sometimes because of sickness and hunger and loneliness and grief; that our loved ones leave us through death or estrangement; that hurricanes destroy islands and tornadoes and floods sweep away relationships and communities that we have worked hard to create. That mental illness or sometimes just plain meanness leads us to hurt others or others to hurt us. That we are complicit in systems of injustice that we didn't create and have no idea how to extricate ourselves from. That eventually we. will. die.

Perhaps this is why the idea of eternal life is so compelling, even when we don't know what it means. But maybe life eternal isn't what we think it is.

Because our vision of eternal life usually looks like an individual endeavor. We die and then we pass on into another life, into heaven, into unbroken communion with God. Each of us, individually. Jesus died for our sins so we can have eternal life and as long as we pray that prayer or say those words we're in. Whatever and wherever in is.

But what if there's more?

Jesus says that the judgement of this world will result in the ruler of this world being driven out. The ruler that whispers untruths in our ears that lead to us hurting ourselves, hurting our loved ones, hurting God's good creation. The ruler that whispers 'those people are out to get you' and 'this drug will take away your pain' and 'your country is the one that counts so you should put tariffs on their goods or torture and kill their women and children or bomb their country into oblivion' or 'profits for your corporation are more important than having clean water and air' or a myriad of other lies that make us think we're in power but in reality pit us against each other and keep us from being the complete and perfect people of God. That keeps us from knowing the real power of the promises of God.

That ruler of this *cosmos*, this broken world that we live in, that ruler will hold on to us until God casts them out, until the world is judged and that ruler is cast out. That can't happen as long as we are not willing to face the judgment and be released from what holds us in thrall. That can't happen until we follow Jesus by dying to ourselves and coming back to life in him.

So what does that mean? It can mean a lot of things, I think. Our lives today are very complex and we are enmeshed in many systems that cause suffering without even knowing it. We are complicit in exploitation when we buy cheap clothing because they are too often made by poor people for a low wage in often harsh conditions. We are complicit in exploitative systems when we go to the grocery store and buy meat from a factory farm that mistreats animals, or veggies picked by migrant workers. We are responsible for keeping the system alive when we drive our cars down the street instead of walking where we could walk, when we litter and pollute the water and air with the factories that make

our goods. When we build McMansions instead of affordable housing and push low income people farther and farther to the edges of social life.

These are the things that this world, this *cosmos* will be judged for—the systemic exploitation and destruction of God’s good creation—including the human beings around us.

So how do we extricate ourselves from these systems?

We have to grow to hate these systems that ruin and destroy God’s good creation. To me, that’s what Jesus means when he says *those who hate their lives in this world will keep it for eternal life*. Hate on a corporate or community scale, hate for the ways we live that take advantage of—or totally discount—other human beings and the rest of creation. Hate here is not a negative thing; it’s more of a turning away or giving up of. We are to give up our dependence on the ways and systems of this world.

Then, we have to look to the light. Besides calling himself the son of Man and comparing himself to a grain of wheat, Jesus implies that he is the light (other places he says it outright.) Walk in the light while you can, so you will know where you’re going. Believe in the light, follow the light, be the light. Don’t be overcome by the darkness that is spread by the ruler of the world; don’t be overwhelmed by the enmeshment we find ourselves in.

We are generally afraid of confrontation, especially when it will upset our way of life. Because, even though the systems are exploitative and destructive they keep some of us safe and warm and comfortable. Why on earth would we want to confront that, end those things that keep us in the life to which we’ve become accustomed? Perhaps because it comes at the expense of many more human beings on this earth than us? Perhaps because God loves all people and wishes for us to care for the exploited by helping them out of their predicament? Isn’t that what confrontation does, shine a light on something bad or broken hiding in the darkness, so it can be repaired, made whole?

I still don’t know what eternal life is, but what I do know is that we are to follow Jesus Christ, to the cross if necessary, to the people who are in need for sure, in whatever way that works for us and serves God’s purposes. In the end all people will be drawn to Jesus because he was lifted up and because we bear witness to that death and resurrection by looking to the light, recognizing our own responsibility for the way the world is, and showing others what it means to die to ourselves and be reborn in Christ. Amen.