

## Seeds

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-25

The First Church of Christ in Hartford, Connecticut

March 18, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

“We wish to see Jesus.” A group of Greeks come to the disciples asking to see Jesus. They relay this request to Jesus who utterly ignores the request and starts talking about grains of wheat dying and producing new life and how those who hold tightly onto their current lives will lose them, but that something is being born.

Um, but Jesus, we asked about the Greeks who want to see you?

He did answer, you see, but it was not the answer they expected. Jesus had become a bit of a celebrity, so numerous people wanted to hear him preach or be healed by him. Three years into his ministry, he had a reputation and a set of teachings and everyone wanted exactly what he had been giving.

But now, he said, that’s done. I’m on to something new, and you need to get with the program. I’m not predictable and I’m not going to trot out my act whenever anyone new comes along. Now is the time for us to let go of what has become familiar because God is doing something utterly new. If we love our lives as they are so much that we are unwilling to let God break in, then we will lose everything. We have to see that God is planting and there will be great growth and new fruit, but we’ve got to let some things go, put them in the ground, like compost, where God will transform them from death to life.

I’m sure this was confusing to the disciples because I think it is still confusing, partly because we don’t want to hear what he is saying. Whenever we are asked to let go of something familiar, there’s a cost, and we are never eager to pay that cost. Somehow,

we find it hard to imagine God transforming loss into wonderful, even though we have seen it time and again. We just can't believe death can become resurrection.

Seeds. Bulbs. (hold them up). They look dead. Hard to believe they have the capacity to bring new life, beautiful, fruitful, nutritious life. But you know they do. You see it every spring. When I was in seminary at Princeton, I had a friend from southern California who had never experienced winter. One day in January as we walked about the campus, he remarked how sad it was that the grass died and had to be replanted every spring. I laughed and told him we didn't have to replant; it would get green and grow again. He did not believe me! So, I bet him an ice cream cone that it would. Easiest bet I ever won. He was amazed and dumbfounded in April and May when things began to green up.

Why do we cling so tightly to what we believe to have been always true, to a feeling in our heart that God cannot change what is now, and that God does not want to, because perhaps we don't want to! That Serenity prayer that folk are fond of quoting, written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and used widely by AA groups, has a second line that reads "The courage to change the things I can." There's a lot more that we can change; what we often lack is not only courage, but the belief that these things can change with the help of God!

Both readings today talk about God doing something new. Jeremiah writes that in the past, children suffered because of their parents' sins, down the generations. Actually, new research shows that in some ways this is still true, not because God punishes, but because old addictions and traumas can get encoded in our DNA. Jeremiah is saying that God is not satisfied with that, and is about planting God's way of life, forgiveness and compassion, risky, bodacious love in our very DNA. Jeremiah didn't know from DNA so he said in our hearts. New generations, Jeremiah says, don't need us to try to get them to do exactly as older generations have done; they have within them the power of God to do something new. We

can move with that, or against it. We don't need to hold on to the past. "Your sins are forgiven," God says, "now get with the program."

I watched the news of all the children and teens walking out of school on Wednesday to remember those who died in Parkland, Florida a month ago, and to call leaders to account for having done little of value to change anything since. I was particularly touched by the students in places where the school forbade the walkout, and still some brave few left the building or took a knee in the hallway. I can't wait to join the teens leading the March for Our Lives on March 24 here in Hartford.

God is planting something new all around us, directly out of death. Something is trying to be born in our world, and I believe God to be in the middle of it. The question before us from Jesus is, what do we need let go of, turn into compost, and what do we need to be willing to plant, in order to be part of God's breaking-in to our world?

When I decided that I wanted our addition to the cross this week to be pots of dirt in which something dead-looking would be planted, I went over to the Home Depot near my house on a mission to get daffodil or tulip bulbs. I looked all over the garden section and asked someone in the orange apron, and all we could find were peonies and asters and rose bushes and gladiolus. But, darn it, I wanted daffodils or tulips, and they were nowhere to be found.

As I stood in the middle of the store, with a most irritated look on my face, thinking I might need to drive around (in the snowstorm on Tuesday, by the way) to other stores to find daffs or tulips, it suddenly occurred to me how ridiculous that was. Why did it need to be those familiar flowers, the ones I always planted in my garden? Why not glads instead? I've never grown gladiolas, partly because I associate them with the kind of flower arrangements you see at funerals. They were "death flowers" in my mind. Which, of course, makes them perfect to be planted as the same metaphor Jesus used.

Beloved, let us not be afraid of what new thing God might be doing, even if it requires something in us to be lost! The courage to change the things we can. That's what those teenagers are telling us, you know. They are calling us to let the fear in our society that makes people think they need bigger and bigger weapons to protect themselves, and then think they need to use them to avenge some wrong or to take their own lives because they perceive nothing in them that might bear fruit! But God is always at work in the world, shouting to us that our sins are forgiven and now we need to get with the growth into something new program, looking inside to discern the Spirit of God not just moving in the words of an old book, but inside us, growing something wonderful!

Remember the Greeks that wanted to see Jesus? Jeremiah could answer their request by calling them to look within, to perceive God working on and in and through them if they can let go of preconceived notions and open up to the new. That's where Jesus is. I don't know what happened with them. I want to discover what might happen in me and with us. Let us let go of whatever needs to be let go, allowing it to become compost for new growth. Let us be passionate, diligent, open-hearted to let God bloom something new and unexpected in the soil of our individual lives, of this church, and of this world. (plant the bulbs) Amen.