

**Sermon: March 21, 2021 – Lent V – John 12: 20-33**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore – Rev Greg Wooley**

Legacy. One's legacy can be a tough thing to ponder. While a legacy doesn't necessarily wait until one has died, the word does remind me of my mortality; and the other tricky thing about assessing my legacy is that it's only partly about what I pass along. My legacy will rely heavily on how it lives on in the lives of others.

Now, before going any further I must name that some legacies are phenomenally painful: family legacies of neglect or anger or prejudice or abuse, complicated legacies of those who have loved who have hurt you (or vice versa), and our shared societal legacy of a disrupted natural world, and broken treaty promises. I do know that even this word "legacy" may be triggering for some, and I will name some of that hard stuff in prayer later in today's service.

What today's gospel reading invites me to consider, though, is a more positive thing: what we strive to leave as a legacy. Some parts of one's legacy are concrete and easily controlled if one has cash or heirlooms to pass along. For the most part, though, one's legacy is complex and elusive. It's hard to know one's enduring impact on others, but the reality is, *we may not have much of an idea, even now*, of how we are perceived by others. Preachers get mini versions of this each time we step in front of a congregation or, for the past year, in front of a video camera. Those Sundays when I feel "in the zone" are weeks that I may completely miss the mark, while those Sundays where I shrug my shoulders and say, "well, it's too late to do anything about it now" may be words that people will quote back to me in affirming ways, weeks or even years afterward.

This morning's gospel reading bring us face to face with the kind of legacy that Jesus is going to leave. At this point in the gospel of John, we're at a transition point. As stated by Bible Scholar Gail O'Day, chapters 11 and 12 of John "stand as a bridge between Jesus' ministry and his hour. They belong neither to the public ministry nor to the story of Jesus' hour, but constitute their own section within the Gospel narrative. John 11-12 move the public ministry into the context of Jesus' death." So the words Jesus chooses here, both recap what he has been attempting to convey throughout his ministry, and set the stage for his dying and rising. And because the Gospel of John was written long after the death of Jesus, at least 35 years and maybe double or even triple that, it's hard to assert that that these words are direct from the mouth of Jesus. But we can be 100% certain that these words tell us of the legacy of Jesus, sacred memories held as a guiding light by the early Church. Whether or not they are precisely the words he spoke, these are among the words that Jesus was remembered by.

And what were these legacy words? "24 I tell you for certain that a grain of wheat that falls on the ground will never be more than one grain unless it dies. But if it dies, it will produce lots of wheat. 25 If you love your life, you will lose it. If you give it up in this world, you will be given eternal life." (John 12: 24-25, Contemporary English Version).

The metaphor that Jesus chooses here, has brought so much comfort and confidence to two millennia of Christ-followers. To germinate, a kernel of grain has to give up its present form and reality and when it does, something bigger and better results. In the case of grain, it's not a conscious choice, it's just the natural order of things. The first form dies, in order for new life to happen. And so it is with my life, and your life, and

every life: we will die, we absolutely will; and then, we are promised, there is transformation.

Metaphorically, we are called to “give ourselves up” time and time again, as we spoke of three weeks ago when we engaged the concept of “dying to self and taking up our cross.” We are repeatedly called away from our ego needs, to be concerned with the common good. But Jesus, here, or at least John’s recollection of Jesus, is also talking about actual death, and that is not a comfortable place to tarry for many of us.

I do not in any way come from a heaven-and-hell framework, but I most certainly do believe in a realm beyond this one, and I believe that we have the agency to make permanent decisions about our destiny in the way that we choose to live life, one decision after another. Repeatedly in life, and in the overall shape of our lives, we have the ability to choose between lifting people up, or breaking them down. We have the choice between engaging, supporting and attending to the needs of the world or ignoring them. We have the choice between a generous spirit and a miserly spirit, between selflessness and selfishness. And while this reading from John, and others like it, have typically been read in a sort of “reward and punishment” way – suggesting that if I do the things that Jesus tells me to do often enough, I will be rewarded with an end-of-life gift - that’s not my read of it. All the way through his ministry, Jesus has been describing and demonstrating a new way of being, a new epoch that will be uplifting and supportive and generous and selfless, and either we trust him enough to actually give ourselves over to that, or we don’t. Moment by moment, season by season, I am called to give myself repeatedly to Christ’s agenda of love and light and life. That everlasting life that Jesus refers to isn’t so much a deferred reward, as it is a way of being, a *differently-shaped life that begins now*. And while it may be three steps forward and two steps back – or, sometimes, two steps forward and ten steps back – this journey of earthly life brings us back to this choice over and over again, dying to selfishness and ego-involvement, living into the greater common good; dying to fearfully holding on to what I’ve built and achieved and accumulated, and bravely living into Christ’s new way of being. Everlasting, yes, but with glimpses and moments even now.

We will die. As Dr Peter Nichol so memorably put it four years ago at a presentation here at Ralph Connor, “the death rate in Canada is one per person.” And like it or now, when we die, we leave a legacy.

So: how would you like to be remembered? What steps have you taken to make the world a better place, to be a positive influence in ways both large and small? Have you given back as much as you have taken? Are there contributions you have made or will make to our commonly-shared wellspring of artistic beauty, or knowledge, or new ways of seeing things? Will your idiosyncrasies – which will be remembered, I can pretty much guarantee you – bring a smile to someone’s face, or a frown?

As a society, what legacy are we leaving future generations? On a global level, the cries of young climate activists like Greta Thunberg have declared our environmental legacy is nothing short of shameful. On a local level, the legacy that our pattern of development will leave behind for future generations, including our impact on the environment and wildlife. has been a large part of the impassioned presentations to Town Council these past two weeks – over 1,300 written submissions and nearly 200 verbal presentations.

And what about our legacy as a community of faith: when the time arrives to emerge from the state of health emergency, and we assess how we have been changed by that, what will we be our contribution to the greater common good? As Rundle Memorial United Church seeks to amalgamate into Ralph Connor, we consider the legacies of both these congregations, the spiritual home they have provided, the inspiration they have given to outreach ventures, the role they have played in town life... and we seek to discern what comes next in our engagement of community needs. As always, what we seek, is for our participation in alleviating need and addressing injustice will align with the words and ways of Jesus – that our living legacy will, in essence, be the body of Christ in this place, working for the good of all living beings.

The legacy of Jesus, is an amazing and profound proclamation of all-in engagement with the needs of the world. The legacy of Jesus enters fully and deeply into the sacred cycle of death and resurrection, and calls us to release our fear of death, and to find what happens when we give ourselves completely to Christ's present and everlasting agenda of love and life. As individuals, as a society, in our gathered life as communities of faith, we seek ways for the legacy of Jesus to be expressed in our lives, touching those we encounter now and, God willing, enduring on beyond that. What a remarkable call and process and promise, by our gracious and loving God. Amen.

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