

“Unless You Die”

John 12:20-33

March 29, 2009

24-25 "Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal." (The Message)

It has been a difficult time for this community this past year. Mary Michaelson died, Davis's lost a son, Pat Plunkett died Thursday morning, many of you have been ill or received bad news about your health. Many are worried that your retirement funds are shrinking and may disappear.

- You remember September 11, 2001.
- Do you remember April 20, 1999 and a school called Columbine?
- I remember Sunday, September 19, 1993. A friend and co-worker of mine, Rev. Ron Phillips, was leading the worship service at a small church in North Salem, Indiana. In the congregation, a former girlfriend, Elizabeth

Mayberry, rose from her pew, walked down the aisle toward the chancel, pulled a gun out of her purse, and shot him dead.

- Everlarlo, our bus driver in Costa Rica, told us the story of how his bus was attacked by bandidos in Guatemala. One of his passengers was shot to death. He received a bullet in his shoulder, which is still there, was tied up and locked up in the baggage area of the bus, and pushed off the road.
- Everyday some innocent group of people is killed by a suicide bomber.

Why do we suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why doesn't God answer our prayers? Why can't God protect us? Why did God let Jesus die?

Let me ask you: in all of this, have you seen the spirit of love die? Have we stopped celebrating Easter every year? Have we given up on resurrection? Have we stopped praying?

God created us out of love. Out of love, God created us with free will. And now, out of loving respect for us, God refuses to pull the puppet strings to make us dance. We are free: free to love, free to hate, free to be evil, free to be good,

free to make choices, free to choose life or death. Free to fall into despair when life seems too difficult. Free to trust God that these times do not have the last word. Which will you choose?

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Do you remember the second to last album by the Beatles? It was called "Abbey Road." The 2nd to last song is a little musical reprise called "The End." It goes, "And in the end the love you take is equal to the love you make."

Love never dies. Love is eternal. God is love.

You never die. In Christ you are eternal. In Christ you are love.

Brother Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk from Albuquerque who wrote the book on contemplative prayer we're using in our weekday

study, preached a sermon on this topic a few years ago titled "You Have Never Been Hurt." He spoke of the necessity that our false selves must die so that our true selves can be free to live:

We take this little self that we are far too seriously and this little self is frankly too little to address or to be addressed by the Great Mystery that we call God. We are seeking in whatever ways we can to find the self as Paul put it, "hidden with Christ in God." ...The self that we are dealing with is largely an illusion. It doesn't exist and we keep trying to dress up this false self. We try to make it more Christian, more Catholic, more Methodist, more holy, more pious, more good and it never works because the self itself is fragile, insecure, and metaphysically does not exist. ...I think this little self will always be wounded and will always be wound able; in fact, very wound able. The true self—and I mean this intentionally and maybe with a bit of intentional shock—the true self, "you," can never be hurt. You can never be hurt. It's only the tiny self that feels offended, that feels insecure, that feels inadequate, like it doesn't have enough, like it needs more. But the self that you are, the beloved daughter, the

beloved son, the self hidden with Christ in God, is basically untouchable. It is indestructible. ... It is already in God. ...I think, brothers and sisters, that all great spirituality is about letting go: letting go of what we think we are, letting go of what we think we need to be. It will feel like letting go, or to put it more directly, it will feel like dying.

Suffering is real. Our pain at the loss of friends and family is real. But it cannot hurt us; it cannot kill us, because our true selves are protected in God. And so we are called to trust God and step out into the hurting world and share this good news of eternal life in Christ. Unless we are willing to take that risk, to risk our fragile false selves dying, we will never experience true life in God.

John Wesley wrote to his people called Methodist the following Rule of Conduct:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

A few years ago, just before Thanksgiving, Tom Lind, a salesman from Montana, was making his rounds, traveling his regular route along the southern Oregon coast. As usual he was in his older model pickup, piggybacked with his small camper.

Looking to continue his route south and east, Lind made a fateful spur-of-the-moment decision. He opted to take the scenic route. Only a few miles on this blue highway, however, the elevation rose rapidly and good ol' Oregon drizzle transformed into swirling snowflakes. Tom was in his big pickup, so he kept going. But the snow kept coming. Soon Tom found himself in the middle of a blizzard whiteout.

Forced to pull over, Tom stopped for the rest of the day. By nightfall his pickup was a slightly discernible lump of white in a vast landscape of snow. Still Tom wasn't terribly worried. He was in his big pickup. Soon the road-clearing crews would be along and would help him escape the cold clutches that held him and his truck captive.

What Tom didn't realize was that the scenic route he had chosen was closed after the first winter snowfalls. The Forest Service didn't maintain that

road in any way. They would not be coming up that way until spring thaw.

But Tom didn't know that. Convinced that someone would be along as soon as there was a break in the weather, Tom determined to do the smart thing: stay in his big truck. Avoid the risks of exposure or getting hopelessly lost in a snow drift by hunkering down in his big truck.

As soon as he failed to arrive at his next sales appointment, family and friends, state and local police forces began searching for Tom. No one thought to venture up the little used, completely snow-blocked back track Tom had chosen. When the weather cleared and blue skies and sun shone down on Tom's trapped vehicle, the salesman opted to continue being smart and safe: he stayed with his big truck.

At the end of January a group of back-country skiers inadvertently came across Tom and his safe haven big pickup truck. Tom's journal revealed he had finally died sometime around January 15. His emaciated, dehydrated body was still in his truck. In trying to minimize his risks, Tom thought he was opting to stay safe. It turned out Tom was opting out of life.

Jesus is inviting us this morning to live a new life. Jesus is inviting this church this morning to move from a haven of safety and refuge to risk movement and mission out in the world.

Are you willing to move out of the shell you're in? Are you willing to risk following Jesus. Are you willing to risk life? Are you willing to get out of the shell of YOUR big pickup truck and face the future?

Sweeping across Germany at the end of WW2, Allied forces searched farms and houses looking for snipers. At one abandoned house, almost a heap of rubble, searchers with flashlights found their way to the basement. There, on a crumbling wall, a victim of the Holocaust had scratched a Star of David. And beneath it, in rough lettering, the message:

“I believe in the sun -- even when it does not shine;
I believe in love -- even when it is not shown;
I believe in God -- even when he does not speak.”

What a caterpillar calls death and the risk of the unknown, we call a butterfly. AMEN.