

The narrative we have read in John Chapter 12 occurs in Jerusalem soon after Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from death in Bethany, just two miles away. In the act of bringing Lazarus back to life, Jesus has deliberately given the people of Bethany a sign of his divine power. Martha declares aloud that he is the Messiah. Honor is also given by Mary, who with deep gratitude anoints his feet with expensive oil and wipes them with her hair, to imply he is indeed the Messiah. The actions of Jesus continue as he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, the people waving palm branches and proclaiming "Hosanna! Blessed is He Who Comes in God's Name!" Knowledge of his miraculous act has spread quickly and gone viral -- Jesus has become a sensation, for he has shown remarkable proof of his divinity. God intended that there should be many witnesses who would behold the astonishing display of the power of Christ in Lazarus.

He has chosen this time and place carefully, for he knows that Jerusalem is the place to be at this time of year. The teeming crowd has traveled for many miles, even days, coming from all directions to celebrate the festival of the Passover, and to worship in the Temple.

The responses of the people upon hearing of these events are intensely divided, as crowds of people form to see and hear Jesus, while the Pharisees, incensed by his miracles and overwhelming popularity, plot to destroy him; and some disciples become more reverent, while within the heart of one of them, Judas, irritation and separation from Jesus escalates. All eyes and ears strive to focus on Jesus as he finally chooses this time to reveal himself as Messiah among the people.

The scene is expediently set for a powerful statement by Jesus to his listeners regarding not only what is to happen but also what it means. When Philip and Andrew announce to him that some Greeks "Wish to see Jesus," he seizes his opportunity: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," Jesus immediately says to them. It is the climax of his entire ministry unfolding before them. He tells them he will be glorified, and God confirms it with a thunderous voice in the heavens. He is here to bear the fruit of salvation for humanity.

Then, Jesus tells them a startling proverb: Grains of wheat must in a sense die to what they are if they are not to remain alone and fruitless. And so it is that human individuals must in a sense die to the love for their own lives, lest in loving themselves above all else they lose their lives and destroy themselves.

This paradox seems to be a warning that the people have an impossible, foreboding task ahead of them that brings destruction and loss; yet, in the bearing of fruit, a happy ending may be possible. The disciples are not yet capable of understanding the paradox, for it is told before they have witnessed the resurrection -- when Jesus will absolutely and completely surrender to the God whom he calls Abba.

Jesus invites his followers to submit in obedience, to disregard this life and look to a better life that will be rewarded in the heavenly kingdom. The servants of Christ shall be his companions both in life and death, for when he is raised, he will gather them to himself. Then, Jesus turns to himself and the pending judgment of God.

Although Jesus is of God, he also lives in vulnerable, human flesh; and he confesses that his very soul is troubled. To be vulnerable is the crux -- the "cross to bear" of human life -- to surrender one's life for the sake of another.

In these words, "Now my soul is troubled", we see, that truly, God has a heart. He is emotionally moved by the thought of his own future suffering. He can feel, and contemplate the fear, and be tempted to shy away from his gruesome, future reality. His intention to die in order to bear fruit, is now at hand.

In stark honesty, he is sharing an intimate feeling that connects his humanity with those around him. He shares a part of himself, his deepest emotions and fears.

Connection is the beginning of a real relationship. Although those listening cannot fully understand why his soul is troubled, they can certainly empathize with his obvious distress. They are "seeing Jesus" in a personal way they had probably not imagined. This superhero has raised his friend from the dead and now admits he is feeling very human. Even so, he is obedient. For he declares, "And what should I say: 'Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.'"

There are five steps of thought in this passage: (verses 27-28)

- 1) Jesus complains of his deep sorrow over his fate; then
- 2) He questions his fear: What shall he do? Next,
- 3) He prays to the Father to deliver him. His vulnerable heart is raised to God. There is no inner pretense, no outward show of false courage or strength. Jesus shows himself to be who he really is at this moment: an earthly man who finds strength from God for his weakness. Then,
- 4) out of obedience he chooses to suffer rather than to not fulfill the wishes of his Father; and finally,
- 5) he finds fulfillment in the glory of God alone and regards all else as having no value.

Christ is not a God of Stone, but a God of Suffering Love. And the Father declares he has been glorified in the life and work of his Son, and will continue to be glorified, for the thunderous voice of promise has come for our sake.

The word "judgment" is so often viewed as a synonym of the word "condemnation"; but for this world to bear the fruit of love for neighbor and grow in righteousness, harmony, unity, and peace, it is important that we see the word "judgment" as a synonym for "reformation" or "transformation." It is only in the love of God that we can change as he wills us to do! To be "condemned" in this life means that God has shut the door of the jail cell and thrown away the key!

"God's power is the power of love, which does not seek to dominate, which does not act arbitrarily (as if such willfulness were the greatest form of freedom), but acts consistently in love, which authentically concerns itself for others." (Barth)

God's power looks not like imperious Caesar but like Jesus on the cross. God has come down to us as Christ, in all vulnerability, to suffer for us because he loves us so deeply. God will never give up on us.

"God does not forfeit anything by doing this. On the contrary, precisely in showing willingness and readiness for this . . . God is marked out from all the false gods. . . the deities of human manufacture are a reflection of human pride, which will not stoop to that which is beneath it. Such is not the God we come to know in Jesus." (Barth)

"It would be a weak, poor God who could not love or suffer. Such a God would be caught in a prison, incapable of suffering pain or emotion. (Moltmann, quoted in Barth)

Love means a willingness to take risks, to care for the other person in a way that causes the other's fate to affect one's own, to give to the other at real cost to oneself, to chance rejection.

Love does not regret the price it pays for making itself vulnerable. Vulnerability is a perfection of loving freedom. Such loving freedom offers us a model for the living of our own lives.

My grandmother came to the U. S. at the age of six from Croatia. The hard life of immigrants in the early 1900s was a story my family heard from early childhood. Grandma had many

disappointments and unfortunate experiences in her life; but she was intelligent and indomitable – and instead of allowing her bitter memories of exclusion and ridicule to drag down her spirit, she aspired to become an advocate for the poor and disenfranchised. She was a kind, earnest grandmother with a tough outer shell when needed. She loved her family deeply.

When I was about 12 years old, Grandma was living in Denver. My three siblings and I loved to visit her in the summer and enjoyed playing with our younger cousins who lived nearby. One day we were all in her front yard, kicking a ball back and forth to each other, while the youngest cousins, just toddlers, were playing nearby. One of us kicked the ball toward our uncle's car which was parked in the driveway; the ball hit the side of the car and rebounded, rolling under the car. Little Brad, about 18 months old, was next to the car and immediately began to crawl under the car to retrieve it.

Suddenly, the car's gear released and slowly began to roll down the incline of the driveway. We watched, frozen in fear. Grandma, who had been watching us play from the living room window, bounded out the front door, ran to the car, and planted her foot against and in the path of the tire; my uncle ran to his son and pulled him to safety.

We stood frozen, slowly comprehending what had almost happened, and were in awe of our grandmother. In retrospect, I can see that not only had Grandma shown selfless love and courage, she also would have done the same for any of us. The risk that every bone in her foot would be fractured was of no matter to her. Grandma's thoughts were only to save the child.

The "fruit" that my grandmother produced during her life came directly out of her suffering. She chose to persevere through life's challenges and found in herself the freedom to love and even forgive those powers in society who worked so hard against her.

Our own suffering fosters compassion and caring for others. If we live a life of perfect contentment, receiving everything without some hard work and sacrifice, we do not extend our attention beyond our selves, for we have never had to suffer through anything and cannot relate to suffering. Our suffering causes us to feel, to put ourselves in another's place, and to help alleviate the plight of another . . .

Part of what it means to trust in God is to know that God loves us and enables us to take risks of a kind we could not otherwise dare. When opening ourselves to the suffering of others without limit, we can destroy ourselves, taking on more pain than we can bear. However, there is no such thing as more pain than God can bear.

"To love at all, is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one . . . it will not be broken;(but) it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." (Lewis)

In freely loving, God is most of all who God is, most exemplifying the power God has. When power means the uneasy quest for domination, then to be moved by another, or wounded by another's pain is to be experienced as a form of powerlessness, and love is trapped between inaction and the risk of impotence. But the strange power of God, reveals such quests for power as a kind of weakness.

Jesus, although vulnerable, will not ask to be spared this hour, for it bears the reason for his life. Love is his power and strength.

To offer ourselves to others is to find the true joy of this life – it is the seed that gives of itself to nurture another soul, bearing much fruit - even in imperceptible ways that others may not notice. The true test of loving life on earth is when we continue in it as long as it pleases God, and then carry it in our hands and offer it to God as a sacrifice.

Devoting our life as an offering to the purpose of God toward this world will create a world that rewards us with ultimate freedom from destructive powers and deceit, through the promises of God, which are carried by selfless love, and offered most clearly in the passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All honor and thanksgiving be to our loving, suffering, and redeeming God.
Amen.