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Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster

March 22, 2015 – Lent V

John 12:20-33

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,

Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;

Love lives again, that with the dead has been:

Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green. [1]

Here we are, on the fifth Sunday of Lent. Next week will be Palm Sunday, followed by the remembrances of Holy Week, and then two weeks from today, we will gather here to celebrate Easter together.

So, this is the thick of Lent. For those taking on fasting disciplines, right about now is when you might be feeling, deep in your soul, just how much absence really does make the heart grow fonder, at least when it comes to chocolate, or coffee, or Facebook, or whatever you like enough to mark its absence as a fast.

For me, there's always been a draw to Lent, something appealing in its melancholy and its emphasis on sacrifice and abstinence. For those of us who struggle more with sins of omission than commission, it's a season whose rigors can feel more like vindication than discipline. And whenever you're feeling smug or vindicated, it's a pretty safe bet that it's time to re-read the passage, or re-think the season, or at least do some self-inventory and reflection, because you're most likely missing something.

The passages for today were a helpful check for me, throwing me off my Lent balance in some important ways. From the passage in John 12: unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit ...

This verse, and particularly the hymn setting of it that we just sang, remind me of Glen Lapp, the CMCLer who was killed almost five years ago while doing medical work with Mennonite Central Committee in rural Afghanistan. My first memory of singing that song was when we sang it in remembrance of Glen in one of the services after his death.

The reminder that new life can spring from death, that a life well-lived leaves a lasting and living legacy, made sense to me then, and makes sense to me now. I never even knew Glen personally, but I've seen the fruits of the intentions he planted, of the relationships he tended, of the justice for which he advocated.

If loving life is a formula for losing it (again from John 12), Glen was apparently a good candidate, as he seemed to love life deeply and live it joyfully. When life got hard, he didn't complain, rather, as we all now know, he just said, "ok, well, pedal harder!" [2]

The part of this reading that's more difficult for me is the part where it says, "those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This has always been baffling to me. Perhaps because the creating aspect of God has been one of the most accessible to me. We read that God created all life, and declared it good. Jesus spoke of coming so we could have life, and not just any life, but abundant life (John 10:10).

Why would there be a reward for hating life?

It sure doesn't fit along side my sacred scriptures – my little self-selected canon within the biblical canon -- the passages I like best and that confirm my favorite view of God. But when I step back and look at some of the passages and teachings I look at less often, I see some possible connections:

Jesus shouting and slinging tables in the Temple (John 2)

Jesus saying, "I come not to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10)

Jesus yelling, "Woe, hypocrites!" to the people in power (Matthew 23)

Within this context, I begin to see a place.

And I wonder, what if this verse is about anger? Righteous anger, and refusing to acclimate to injustice?

What if people who are enslaved, oppressed, bullied, violated, discriminated against and marginalized are SUPPOSED to hate their life – or at least, their lot in life?

I tend to have very little patience for complainers. If you're complaining about the same thing over and over, you're either inflexible or spoiled or entitled. If you aren't doing anything to change it, stop talking about it! I tend to be a proponent of the Monty Python view to: *Always look on the bright side of life!* Because you'll tend to be happier. (Even though what I probably mean is, if YOU shut up, I'LL be happier!)

As I was thinking about this notion of settling, and how much we bless it, how we often call people who put up with crap "saints," I thought of the story of the proverbial frog in the pot. If you put a frog in hot water, it'll hop right out, clearly realizing the danger it's in. But if you put a frog in a pot of cool or lukewarm water, and if you put that pot on a burner, and if you ever-so-gradually turn up the heat, the frog won't notice the temperature change. Instead, it will contentedly sit there, never noticing that it's now boiling to death.

Well, surprise, surprise, it's not true. Apparently people have tried this out, and discovered that frogs actually do notice gradual changes of temperature, and they do hop right on out of that pot, survival instinct and all. So, this is not a lesson we learned from the frogs.

That story, folks, is about *us*.

We, humans, are the ones who came up with that little wisdom/cautionary tale, because *we* are the ones who can acclimate ourselves to seriously dangerous, even lethal, conditions, and boil ourselves to death, unawares.

We are the ones sitting on an exquisite planet, that has just exactly the right conditions to nurture and support our thriving, blithely ignoring the rising ocean temperatures that are quite literally the water we're sitting in. *We* sit in our pot, and point at the falling snow, as evidence that the water's surely not getting hotter. *We'll* be fine!

We are the ones who see one another in impossible situations, and encourage each other to *stay in them*. "It's not that bad!" we tell people of color in this country. "If you just do everything the cops say, you'll probably be JUST FINE when they pull you over. Just be patient, it'll only be a few more generations until we're all equal."

We tell women, "Yes, maybe our culture is still a little misogynistic or patriarchal, but it's not that bad. You're just too sensitive ... calm down. Just keep your self appropriately covered (except when it's really nice to see you nude). Things aren't as bad as they were, so you should just feel grateful. And meanwhile, enjoy this lovely hot tub!"

We tell gays and lesbians that the water's really not that hot. "If you're patient, the rest of the denomination will see the light, and they'll start turning down the temperature then. It should only take another generation. And oh, you BTQ+ folks ... Yeah, you'll for sure have to wait a little. *We're* still congratulating ourselves for getting a handle on sexual orientation. *We're* still not quite sure what to make of bi, trans, queer and, plus-ness. Sorry, enjoy the jacuzzi while you

wait!”

And while we’re stewing, unbeknownst, in a pot over our own insecurities (over body shape, physical, social or intellectual ability, or even capacity to speak aloud in public) no one’s throwing a mutiny!

We’re all stewing in our pots, trying to be good sports who don’t complain, or envy the slightly less scalding water of others. What if “those who love life will lose it” means that those of us who love our lives (as in, have really nice set-ups in life), what if we are *supposed* to “lose it,” as in GET MAD?

No, I didn’t find a commentator who revealed that in the original Greek, the words we’ve been translating as “lose it” actually mean, “get enraged.” But man, it fits well! What if those of us in Lancaster, one of the cities rated highest in this country on self-reported satisfaction in life^[3] (loving our lives) LOST IT?

Lost it on behalf of the Chesapeake

Lost it on behalf of the land vulnerable to the pipeline

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our Native American brothers and sisters, against the promises still being made and still being broken to them.

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our Palestinian brothers and sisters

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our West African brothers and sisters fighting Ebola

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our brown brothers and sisters called “aliens,” who are more native to this land than most of us, who are being sent “home” by force to countries their children have never seen

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our African-American brothers and sisters who are even now calling out the slow-boiling water trick for what it is to all who will listen

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our brothers and partners and fathers and sons who long to be seen for who they are not just what they do

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our sisters, partners, mothers and daughters who struggle for maternity care and leave, and struggle to have their own self-definitions honored

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our children and youth, whose energy and beauty we covet, while hardly providing presence, connection or respect

Lost it on behalf of and alongside our elders, who we say we respect, all the while struggling never to get old ourselves

Lost it on behalf of and alongside all who have been and are still being physically, emotionally or sexually abused, and/or silenced about it

Lost it on behalf of and alongside those who find daily obstacles in their paths, based on physical and mental health, ability and mobility.

Lost it on behalf of overly genetically modified foods

Lost it on behalf of the vast trash dumps in our oceans and landfills

Lost it on behalf of the bees and the bats and the polar bears

Lost it on behalf of our own selves, against all that would belittle us or try to convince us to expect too much or too little of ourselves

Lost it on behalf of the struggles of us all

The fossil fuels may be running out, but what could we not accomplish with the unleashed energy of our corporate, communal, unsuppressed outrage? I think the stampeding of “good Mennonite girls,” alone, might well be a lesser-known sign of the apocalypse. Look out, world!

The passage in Jeremiah today is referencing teachings about Jubilee – this wonderful idea that every couple of years debts should be written off, land restored to previous owners, slaves freed, some semblance of balance and equity restored, and slates wiped clean. Sadly, despite these amazingly radical teachings, teachings that make me proud to be a Christian, “there is not one single example in or out of the Bible of the powers that be ever allowing the laws to be enacted.” [4] So we are living now on the accumulation of millennia of debt, privilege and resources.

No matter that over and over and over in Deuteronomy, the people are called to “remember when you were a slave in Egypt” to remind them to be the kind of people who would never do to others as was done unto them. I think we all know that our modern track record is no better than that of our ancient forebears.

No wonder we’re all so mad!

When Jeremiah talks of moving the covenant to our hearts, he’s saying, “let’s be honest, this (our hearts) is where covenants happen. This (our hearts) is where justice and right living are born and sustained. If you can’t find it in your heart, there’s really no point. So, I, God, am going to try to reach you there, instead of these tablets of law, that, without your heart, are clearly meaningless.” [5]

So, my friends, let us rage at the pots we’re scalding in! And then let’s all give each other a hand to climb out, so that we can get to the work of picking up these crosses upon which we find ourselves and this beautiful world, and begin to carry them together, in love, toward justice.

Just as it snowed on the first day of spring, the green blades are rising, anyway, oblivious of any calendar! Jubilee shall come.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,

Thy touch can call us back to life again;

Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:

Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green. [6]

[1] Hymn text, “Now the green blade riseth,” by John MacLeod Campbell (J.M.C.) Crum. Thanks to Torrie Martin for reminding me of this beautiful hymn!

[2] Jane Holahan, “Slain MCC worker honored at service,” *Lancaster Online*. Posted August 15, 2010. Updated Oct 3, 2013. http://lancasteronline.com/news/slain-mcc-worker-remembered-at-service/article_959b07e1-b115-56f5-a254-78692799c9c2.html

[3] Cindy Stauffer, “Lancaster County tops national well-being index,” *LancasterOnline*. February 28, 2012. Updated November 1, 2013. http://lancasteronline.com/news/lancaster-county-tops-national-well-being-index/article_ec72a8ed-80bc-5136-945a-8c88fcc65607.html

[4] Stan Duncan, "Written on Their Hearts." *If You Lived Here You'd Be Home By Now: Life and Grace and a Journey Home*. <http://homebynow.blogspot.com/2013/10/written-on-their-hearts.html>

[5] I'm referencing his work here, not quoting directly. Stan Duncan, "Written on Their Hearts." *If You Lived Here You'd Be Home By Now: Life and Grace and a Journey Home*. <http://homebynow.blogspot.com/2013/10/written-on-their-hearts.html>

[6] Hymn text, "Now the green blade riseth," by John MacLeod Campbell (J.M.C.) Crum