Strange Fruit
John 12:20-33
A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 22, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Jesus said, “...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.” John has brought us to a place that we may not want to be today. It is clearly the time when the Passover is approaching. Right before our lesson, John mentions the Passover for the third time in his gospel (11:55, 12:1; cf. 2:13, 23; 6:4) like a theological-musical motif that continues to ring in our ears if we are paying attention. Maybe we missed it because we stayed up too late watching the NCAA basketball tournament. Maybe we missed it because we don’t really want to deal with it. We don’t really want to deal with the fact of the Passover, which is the fact of death that is a part of a religion of life.

But before we come down too hard on John for not making this Lenten season light and fluffy, let’s remind ourselves that each Sunday we process into a chapel building that is cruciform—it is an architectural form of death. Duke Chapel is in the shape of a cross, which historically has been a tool of execution, a device of death. We worship under the shadow of death. If you perform the sign of the cross, you perform your life’s death sentence for the sake of Christ. When we lift high the cross, we raise up a symbol of death that is transformed in the light of God in Christ into a symbol of life and hope. We may walk into this building each week without a second thought, but we worship among death and the dead (and I’m not calling you the frozen chosen). When we see Memorial Chapel or walk into the crypt, we have to deal with death.

Some perhaps even enjoy getting close to the dead and find comfort in the crypt. Recently, a Duke student fell asleep in the crypt. I’m not sure what they were doing there but they were obviously comfortable enough with death to hang out down there. They feel asleep and when they awoke the doors were locked so he or she spent the entire night sleeping with the dead. This episode brings new meaning to a ‘near death experience’ and I can guarantee they probably won’t ever do that again.

But not everyone is as comfortable with being around the dead or death like that student. Not everyone wants to be near death because death can be torture as well. In 1937, Jewish writer, teacher, and songwriter Abel Meeropol, wrote a poem called “Bitter Fruit” as a protest against lynchings. It was later recorded as “Strange Fruit” in 1939 by jazz singer Billie Holiday.

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulgin’ eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burnin’ flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.
A strange fruit that haunts the south and all of America. A historical cultural form of death. Not everyone wants to be near death. Not everyone wants to die. Humans have taken life and death into their own hands throughout history, sometimes enthroning death as king and using violent means to put a halt to violence, killing people in order to stop people from killing other people. It is very strange and I’m not sure there is much fruit.

But we can avoid talking about forms of death or face the reality of death head on and be honest and truthful just like the gospel calls us to be. And why wouldn’t we be this Lenten season? The Internet has entered the conversation about death and dying. There is a website, www.deathclock.com, which is “the Internet’s friendly reminder that life is slipping away…second by second.” You can plug in your month, day, and year of birth, your sex, mode (normal, pessimistic, sadistic, optimistic), body mass index, and smoking status, and the death clock will kindly predict when you will die.

Of course, none of us know when we will die because tomorrow is not promised to any of us. Yet, the truth is that we are dying all the time, at least parts of us. You may have just lost half a million cells while listening to that last sentence. Supposedly, we lose about 100,000 cells per second but just as many cells are being reproduced in our bodies. There is a constant cycle of dying cells and rebirth of new ones in our bodies. The cells that don’t die off in the normal cycle apparently are the troublemakers and are related to diseases like cancer. If they don’t die, then we may not live.

And we want to live. We want to prolong our earthly lives as much as possible and medicine can help us do this. Surgeon, author, and Harvard professor Atul Gawande, in his book, Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End, offers insights into the medical world and care at the end of life. He says that when he was in medical school mortality was not a subject he learned or discussed. Modern science has helped people live longer and better than at any other time in history. Health care professionals are the medical ministers in the sanctuaries of hospitals and nursing homes for those experiencing advanced aging and dying. There was a man who was in his sixties and whose wife had died from lung cancer a few years before, and he found himself suffering from an incurable cancer— metastatic prostate cancer. He lost more than 50 pounds. His abdomen, scrotum, and legs filled with fluid. Eventually he lost movement in his right leg and control of his bowels. He was admitted to the hospital and there they discovered that the cancer had spread to his thoracic spine and was compressing his spinal cord.

Emergency radiation didn’t work to reduce the cancer. He was left with two options: comfort care or surgery to remove the growing tumor mass on his spine. This man chose to have surgery. The doctors hoped to halt the progression of his spinal cord damage. It wasn’t a cure or reversal of his paralysis or an attempt to give him back the life he once had because that was impossible. No matter how the surgery turned out, this man would only have a few months to live and the surgery was extremely dangerous— they had to open his chest, remove a rib, collapse a lung to get to his spine, blood loss would be high, recovery would be difficult, and there could be debilitating complications. This man wanted “everything” possible to be done though he would never receive what he really wanted—his previous life and strength. The operation was technically a success because the pressure on his spine was gone but he never recovered from it. He had respiratory failure, systemic infection, blood clots and bleeding from blood thinners to treat the clots. On the fourteenth day after the surgery, he died.

Felix Silverstone, who was a senior geriatrician in New York for many years and has studied and written about aging, was asked if there was a “reproducing pathway to aging.” He said, “No, we just fall apart.” Bestselling books on aging seem to avoid our physical and mental decline with titles like The Fountain of Age, Ageless, and The Sexy Years. Though our medicinal arsenal and technology is top notch, more refined and advanced, medicine doesn’t always pull people through. Medicine may help you hang on but the trajectory is still the same—death. Processes of deterioration can be slowed but cannot be stopped. Death is a normal part of life, even our spiritual life. It is not a failure but it requires a strong faith.
In and through death, you may actually discover what life is all about. Maybe, just maybe, life is not about holding or hanging on, but letting go. Letting go of loved ones who have died is tough. Letting go of ourselves or our plans or our way is not easy. Letting go of the fear of death and dying maybe the fruit that is born when you face death. Attending funerals can be fruitful. Calvin College professor, John Witvliet writes, “For the living, there is no better antidote to arrogant, sloppy living than intentional visits to a funeral home, a walk through a cemetery, or attendance at a funeral. Rule number one for thoughtful living: Do not miss a funeral.” This liturgical form of remembering the dead reminds all of us that we live under a death sentence. Reminds us of our mortality and may help us recognize what is truly important in life in order to reprioritize one’s life. Funerals can bear strange fruit in this way. How might you change if your death was impending? What would you change in your life if you had to plan your own funeral right now? Why wait to change until you are near death? Why not do it now even while you’re dying in the midst of your living?

In his book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, newspaper sports columnist Mitch Albom tells of the time spent with his former 78-year-old sociology professor at Brandeis University, Morrie Schwartz, who was dying from *amyotrophic lateral sclerosis* (ALS). Albom had not corresponded with Schwartz since attending his classes 16 years earlier but after making contact with him, he commutes every Tuesday to visit Schwartz (thus the title of the book). The book is based on the conversations they had on fourteen different Tuesdays. On the fourth Tuesday, they talk about death. Morrie didn’t really think about death a lot before his illness and had even boasted to a friend that he would be “the healthiest old man alive.” Morrie says that realizing the imminence of death is realizing what is essential, thus one may see life in an entirely different light and this is what he encourages Mitch to do. His major lesson to Mitch is, “When you learn how to die, you learn how to live,” meaning that one must accept the possibility of one’s own death before one can truly appreciate what one has on earth. Death is a sobering reminder of life. It bears strange fruit in that way.

It may not be ALS, but we march in a funeral procession on this long Lenten road. We will encounter the funeral of God on a cross. Jesus said, “...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.” Jesus talks about himself. As St. Augustine wrote, “He Himself was the grain that had to die, and be multiplied; to suffer death ... and to be multiplied in the faith of many nations. Multiplication by death. Addition by subtraction. “His adversity is his prosperity” (Gerard Sloyan). The Greeks want to see him and his response is to talk of his death because to see him clearly you have to deal with death, his death, and our own death. His death looms large and he points to it when he says, “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” The cross creates a global community. It is strange fruit from the salvific work of our high priest, Jesus Christ.

And we are a part of that strange fruit hanging from the tree on mount Calvary, dangling there during this hour, the hour of Christ’s impending death. There is nothing like death to give us focus and pause. We know it’s inevitable. His death. Our death. But will we let go or hold on for dear life?

Jesus said, “...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.” The death of Christ, the Christological form of death calls us to a spiritual death. “Whoever serves me must follow me,” Jesus says, “and where I am, there will my servant be also.” As fruit from his wooden tree with blood at the root, we must follow him and go where he goes, even when it means living at a Golgotha cross-road. We may be troubled just like Jesus was but it is for this hour, this moment in Lent, that we have come today. We’ve come to face the reality of death and dying. The end of ourselves. If a grain of wheat doesn’t die it remains a single grain but if it dies, it will bear much fruit. Your spiritual death is a letting go so that the life of God would blossom through you to the world. Holding on to our lives keeps us trapped in the silo of individualism but when we lay down our lives in loving service so much more fruit is possible. You have to let go in order to be fruitful. If you hold on to
your life, you will only be good to yourself but if you lose it by letting go, your influence will be far greater than you ever imagined. Growth will occur if you give up your life to God.

It takes courage to die and the fear of death is always lurking in our neurons but the cross of Christ’s love should exorcize or cast out our fear of death. It takes courage to follow Jesus and it will bear strange fruit because “When Christ calls [us], he bids [us] come and die” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).