

“Imperishable Seeds of Living Hope” by Peter Bankson

May 4, 2014

The Third Sunday of Easter

This time between Easter and Pentecost seems like “chrysalis time.” The caterpillar is being transformed into a new being, one that will carry the Good News to all corners of Creation. The grains of wheat, ground to make bread, die to their identity as seeds even as they feed our identity as the Body of Christ. Is this the “Living Hope” that we carry in our souls as our gift from God? How many grains of wheat have given up their lives to nourish this Body of Christ today?

Two verses from this week’s lessons, suggest a paradoxical look at the death of God’s faithful and the imperishable seed of living hope. “You have been born anew of imperishable seed.” This is certainly the Easter message, for Jesus, but is it also living hope for us?

“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones.” (Psalm 116:15) Might this mean that the faithful do not perish in death? Might the spirit of the faithful live on ... and on? Are these some of the seeds of living hope?

INTRODUCTION

As I started looking at our lessons for this week, wondering about living hope, my first thought was the wonder that filled those two travelers who hadn’t recognized the presence of Jesus as they walked along the road to Emmaus. Even though they were impressed by hearing the story of Jesus’ life and ministry from that apparent stranger they didn’t recognize him for who he was. It took the breaking of the bread at supper for them to understand that they were in the presence of the one they knew so well. Something had changed. It was as though Jesus had been transformed, like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis.

Have you ever opened a chrysalis? If you have, what you find is living mush. The old forms are gone, and the new forms have not yet emerged. If you’ve studied butterflies, you know that this mush is on the way to becoming something wonderful, but looking at the mush it’s hard to see what is emerging. This time between Easter and Pentecost seems like “chrysalis time.” The old “caterpillar reality” is no more, and the new “butterfly time” is yet to emerge. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were living in a time of confused unknowing.

Last week on the pilgrimage Marjory led at Ghost Ranch we spent our afternoons working with various art forms. Many of us worked with local clay, dug from the nearby mesa, making primitive bowls. During the open-pit firing on Sunday, as the flames rose above my head and large flakes of ash drifted downwind, one of them turned and headed the other way, as though it had a mind of its own. It did! All of us who were watching the fire transform our clay pots were startled to see a butterfly with large ash-colored wings tipped in bright red, flying past us toward the mesa. I imagined that it might have been celebrating its liberation from the cocoon that had been its place of transformation.

As I pondered the lectionary lessons for this week in this chrysalis time, some fresh ideas rose to the surface:

1. The first was a line from this week's Psalm that I'd never noticed before: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones." (Psalm 116:15) Might this mean that the faithful do not perish in death? Might the spirit of the faithful live on ... and on? Are these some of the seeds of living hope we're looking for this season?
2. The second was from the epistle: "You have been born anew of imperishable seed." This is the Easter message, for Jesus for certain, but is it also living hope for us?
3. And third is the reality that grains of wheat, ground to make bread, die to their identity as seeds even as they feed our identity as the Body of Christ. Is this the "Living Hope" that we carry in our souls as our gift from God?

This paradox of precious death and imperishable seed reminded me of Paul's questions in his first letter to the little church in Corinth: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55)

Precious Death

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones." (Psalm 116:15) This line in the Psalm for this week jumped out at me as I started working on the sermon. Might this mean that the faithful do not perish in death? Might the spirit of the faithful live on ... and on?

What kind of death are we looking at here? Is it the end of life, or the beginning of transformation, a fresh chrysalis time? It might be the death of an old identity: The caterpillar days are done, and the butterfly is on the way. It might be the death of old assumptions, and we have some unexpected opportunities for learning. Or might it be the death of old understandings: God's reality is more mysterious than we imagined.

We know the Gospel story, so it is a bit easier for us as we look forward to Pentecost to anticipate the new identity that was the emerging church in the first century. But the disciples had to live through it without knowing how it would turn out. As those of us who were in the just completed School

of Christian Living classes on Luke-Acts saw quite clearly, the identity of those who were on the Way with Jesus that emerged after Pentecost had about as much resemblance to the disciples who walked with Jesus as a caterpillar has to a butterfly.

When I look this kind of death in the eye, I can see that I'm in the chrysalis mush. I have a strong sense that I am facing challenges that I do not understand, challenges that are beyond the capabilities of my old "self." What do I need to die to, in order to allow space for some new understanding to emerge? That was one of the important lessons that engaged me during my pilgrimage last week. I'll be sitting with the question as I continue on the road to Emmaus.

For us in Seekers, there are many examples of this kind of precious death, a death that opens a way to new beginnings.

One of those is how we live into forgiveness. Recently, Keith shared an invitation from his father Leroy Seat to join in a month-long "Forgiveness Challenge," based on a new book by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho, who is an Episcopal priest living in Virginia. The challenge will offer a month of daily encouragement to help deepen our understanding of forgiveness, and encourage acts of forgiveness of every size and shape.

The Tutus' "fourfold path" to forgiveness includes (1) telling the story, (2) naming the hurt, (3) granting forgiveness, and (4) renewing or releasing the relationship. Several of us in Seekers have already enrolled in the Forgiveness Challenge. It offers us the opportunity to learn some new paths to forgiveness, some fresh ways to break out of the cocoon of our pain and anger.

Today we honor another image of the end (dare I call it the "death?") of an identity, as we celebrate the end of Paul Holmes' 4-day retirement from USAID after more than 30 years of faithful service there. Tomorrow he will begin living out his ministry in daily life by joining the staff of Diane Willkens' organization, Development Finance International. Reflecting on his three decades of service with USAID, Paul says that "USAID has taken me from the Maghreb to Moscow, from Tahrir Square to Taiz, from Katmandu to Krakow. Together [with his colleagues from USAID] we've worked on slums, sewers, railroads, dams, schools, sorghum and apples. Together we've worked to combat famine, diphtheria, HIV/AIDS, NCDIs, tuberculosis and apartheid. Together we've promoted family planning, micro-enterprise, NGOs, stronger local governments, and more responsive health systems."

I have the feeling that tomorrow, Paul will emerge from his short-lived chrysalis time between USAID and DFI with his imperishable seeds of living hope intact and ready to sprout in new soil.

Imperishable Seed

The line from this week's Psalm, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones," feels very fitting for early Eastertide, but it stands in tension with a line from the Epistle, "You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God." (1 Peter 1:23) This is the Easter message, for Jesus

for certain, but is it also living hope for us? Imperishable seed? What might that mean for us?

In the Gospel for this week, we have the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. As they broke bread together with that knowledgeable stranger who had joined them on the way, something inside them sprang to life. They recognized in him the presence of Jesus. The seeds of Good News that Jesus had sown during his Earthly ministry sprouted fresh and green. The butterfly of Living Hope began to stretch its wings.

My seeds seem pretty familiar: a metaphor that might help us see something from a fresh perspective; a readiness to hold the space for community; a tendency to jump in and help, even when I might not be needed;. But I feel like there are some other seeds down there in my recycled tote bag, waiting patiently to be scattered on fertile ground.

And what about us? Even as we are changing as a community, there are core values that remain, ready to call us into new missions and ministries. One version of them was captured in our call, crafted by Sonya Dyer and Fred Taylor 38 years ago. I think it bears repeating.

Our call is to be a "Seekers community" which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.

By "Seekers community" we mean an intentional body which sees Christ as our true life source. Koinonia with one another and genuine self-giving to the world are the ways we can be in Christ today. Seekers are not persons who have arrived, but persons who are intentionally on the way.

By shared leadership we mean empowering the gifts of women and men to help our worship flow out of and feed into the life of the community. We are committed to evoking and giving space to new gifts of preaching, liturgical leadership, creative worship forms, giving, mission and other acts of faith.

For us, Christian servanthood is based on empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness. We desire and welcome participation in Seekers of women and men of every race and sexual orientation. In Seekers Church we will equip and support each other in all of these areas and seek a balance among them.

The Seekers community sees itself called into Christ's ministry of deliverance from bondage to freedom in every personal and corporate expression. We recognize the value of each individual and seek to heal any wounds of discrimination inflicted by our society and church.

Seekers is committed to participation by persons of all ages. We see children, youth and adults of all ages as valuable and valued parts of our community, and desire their inclusion in our care, our ministry, and our life together.

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Revised by Seekers Core Members in November 1989

Revised by Seekers Core Members in May 1991

For me, this call to community, to being one small part of the Body of Christ, is a seed of living hope. I have the sense that it points to the imperishable power of the presence of God in the world, the power that we know as the Holy Spirit which descended on the faithful beginning on Pentecost, and continues to descend on us today.

An imperishable seed is one that stays fertile until it is planted, or ground into flour, not one that stays a seed forever.

The Gift of Life

Finally, there is the paradox of the death of the faithful and the imperishable seed. The grains of wheat, ground to make bread, die to their identity as seeds even as they feed our identity as the Body of Christ. We know from scripture, and from life, that unless a seed falls to the ground and dies there will be no harvest. Where is the promise of hope? Imperishable seed stays alive until it is planted, then spends its life raising up a new harvest.

In Seekers Church we've tried packaging our seeds in different ways. From 2002 until about 2005 our Seeds of Hope mission group carried a call to share our experience with other faith communities. Here is an excerpt from the call of that group:

The mission group will build upon what we have learned in Seekers and upon what we learn from attending to God's work in other locations to discern and share the seeds of hope for empowering ministry, for deepening personal faith journeys, and for encouraging vital Christian groups and congregations.

Another, current seed packet is Marjory's new book which is headed for publication this fall. "Stalking the Spirit" describes the life of Seekers Church as it has grown from the initial call to the life together that we experience today. It will offer to others descriptions of the different ways we've carried our seeds of Living Hope for almost 40 years.

One of those is community support. Over the past decade we have been learning how to support each other in ways that we never imagined when we arrived here.

Another is hospitality for the wider community. We've become a lively center for community life here on Carroll Street. Yesterday our place was alive with the sound of fiddle music as the Mid-Atlantic Norwegian Dancers gathered to celebrate. And this weekend Sandra has made it possible for us to share our space with Art Hop, featuring Margreta's creative quilting with the wider community. I hope many of us can stay for the reception beginning at Noon.

In 2013 outside groups from the wider community sponsored 653 events in our space. And we support New Story Leadership, an exciting initiative for peace and reconciliation by giving them office space here.

Some of our more exciting seeds of living hope are the many areas where individual Seekers are called to ministry in daily life. As I said earlier, tomorrow morning, Paul will plant the

seeds of his international development experience in the fertile soil of Development Finance International. Many of us have discerned God's call to ministry in daily life as healers, or advocates, or prophetic voices for peace and justice.

As I look at this rich field of sprouting seeds of hope, I wonder about the seeds I carry, the gifts and experiences, the joys and sorrows I bear. What shall I plant next in the fertile soil of this community from all the bounty God has given me, and what am I called to offer up to be ground and kneaded with what you bring as part of this living loaf we know as Seekers Church?

And you? What are the imperishable seeds of hope you have to offer, here and in the wider world?

How many grains of wheat gave up their lives to make the loaf of bread we will share during communion? How will they live on in us? As we often remind ourselves when offering the bread, "You are what you eat: the Body of Christ."

CONCLUSION

This time between Easter and Pentecost seems like "chrysalis time." The caterpillar is being transformed into a new being, one that will carry the Good News to all corners of Creation.

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As I pondered this fresh understanding of imperishable seeds of living hope, I remembered an old poem of mine:

Communion

Grain, crushed to make
a body ... broken
to be eaten
for our wholeness.

Grape, crushed as well ...
her loving spirit
flowing out to each of us.

Globe, crushed by famine,
war and hatred,
foraging for love.

Gifts, broken open
in community; a love
to nurture, nourish all.

Peter Bankson, ca 1990

One final thought: Those two disciples on the Way to Emmaus had to invite Jesus to stay with them, to choose into the emerging Body of Christ as it strained at the chrysalis shell

that had held it during its transformation. We have that choice as well, to invite the Risen Christ to be alive within us.

As we break bread together this morning, let us give thanks for the gift of living hope that does not die, and for God's unfailing love for those who lay down their lives that others might live, and grow, and thrive.

Thank God we're in this together.

Amen.