

**“Dying Seeds; New Fruit”**

**John 12.24–26**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 29 March 2009**

Sometimes, we clutch, we grasp, at things when what we really need to do is to let go. A significant part of our Christian tradition is concerned with what Paul the apostle called *kenosis* – emptying ourselves. And this may sound like a Buddhist concept, but there are differences between seeking absolute emptiness (which is perhaps the key aim of Buddhist meditation) and emptying ourselves so that we can be filled with the spirit of Christ.

Today’s scripture occurs in various forms in the synoptic gospels as well. And it’s a good metaphor. A seed must die in order for it to produce abundantly. Are there parts of your life that need to end in order for you to become productive? Are there aspects of your personality that are holding you back from becoming the person God sees within you? What are the things you are most attached to? Do you need to release them? What do you need to empty in order to fill yourself with the self-giving love that Jesus embodied?



I’m going to do something a little different with my sermon this morning and tell you a story (and there is a little singing, too, so be prepared to join in!):

Once there was a man named Phileas Philpot who lived by himself. He had never married and had no children. He didn’t keep pets, because he thought it was a waste of money feeding and caring for animals. Philpot had been a successful businessman and had accumulated a reasonable amount of money. He had no real financial worries, he’d paid off his home mortgage, but he wanted to make darned sure that the government got very little of what he had – after all, Philpot had worked hard and diligently for many years. He saved, as well. (After all, a penny saved is a penny earned!)

The town he lived in was a thriving community. He liked the park where he walked each day, though he grumbled about the dogs and how much money their owners wasted on them. But, he loved the park’s grove of old oak trees, where he often stopped to sit. The schools in town were in decent shape, though it was common knowledge they were a bit underfunded. Even the political leadership of the community was exemplary. Overall, the quality of life was quite high.

Soon, word got out that this town – Philpot’s town – was a great place to live. (He knew that, of course, and he wanted to keep it *just like it was!*) Being a vibrant community, soon more and more young families began to move there with their children. And that made the community even more vital. And that kind of growth meant the need for new schools. After years of careful planning, the school board and political leaders decided that in order to keep the community vibrant, they would need a bond issue to raise funds to build and renovate schools...make sure that students weren’t overcrowded in their classrooms...and ensure that all the buildings were accessible for students with disabilities. Why, they even wanted to put in a new, accessible playground! And the arts! They even wanted better facilities for their arts programs! Can you imagine that?

How do you think Philpot reacted? He grumbled, of course! He went to the city council meetings and said, “I’ve paid \$879 in property taxes here for the last 40 years! That’s enough! I don’t have children; why should I care about building new schools? Let someone else pay for it! Let those *new people* pay for it!”

Phileas Philpot had his opinions. And even though he had money in the bank – plenty of money – he always thought of himself as not quite poor, but not entirely comfortable. The community as a whole knew that keeping buildings in good shape was

important and that everything in the community depended upon education. Well, the bond issue was approved overwhelmingly in a local election, and still Philpot opposed it. He was getting ready to protest by not paying his taxes. . . . But, then something happened.

Sitting in his favorite oak grove on a Sunday morning with the *Sunday Times*, Phileas Philpot heard something coming toward him. *What was it?* It sounded almost like a stampede, he thought. He turned around and saw 17 Sunday School students and two trail guides from the church next door walking toward him. But, before he could even get out a grumble, he heard them singing a song. . . . it was a song he remembered from his childhood. . . . a song about trees. . . . “Oh, the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the things I need: the sun, and the rain, and the apple seed, the Lord is good to me.”

He *knew* that song! The kids came tripping along through the oak grove, and he noticed one of them pushing another student in a wheelchair – good thing the oak grove was accessible. And then something extraordinary happened. Something so simple. A girl no more than nine years old, who had been carrying an acorn, stopped in front of Philpot and handed it to him with a smile. And then the children kept on going.

Phileas Philpot was not a sentimental man. And he was slightly disgusted with himself as he felt a tear roll down his cheek. He looked at the acorn in the palm of his hand. And that’s when he realized that during his life he had collected too many “acorns” and planted far too few.

But, on that day, Philpot changed. He went home, still holding the tiny acorn he received as a gift. And somehow, he couldn’t get the child’s smiling face, or that song he knew from his own childhood, out of his mind. Not only did he pay his part of the school bond, he wrote a check to help support the arts for children, because that song about trees and seeds got stuck in his heart. And Phileas Philpot planted many, many acorns in his remaining years, and today they exist as new oak trees in some else’s grove.

That’s not the end. . . . it’s just the beginning.



Now, I know that just about everyone in this room would support a bond issue for public schools. And I know you care about kids. And I know that you care about the future. But, isn’t there a little bit of Phileas Philpot in each of us? Worried that we don’t have quite enough? Willing to let “someone else” pay for it? Wanting to keep all of our “acorns” stored away where they won’t germinate and be enjoyed by others after we’re gone? How are you going to take the acorns that have been given to you and help them germinate and grow into mighty oaks – even though it means the acorns you’ve collected will die in the process?

To conclude, let me offer a prayer by one of our own, the UCC’s Walter Brueggemann:

You God of command who issues demands upon us;  
 You God of promise who compels us to hope;  
 You God of deliverance endlessly up-ending our systems of abuse;  
 In all your commanding, your promising, your delivering,  
 we notice your giving.

Indeed your giving is what we notice first, best, and most,  
 about your own life . . .  
 giving without reserve or limitation.

You give us worlds of beauty and abundance,  
 blessed and fruitful,

You give us sustenance for the day,  
                  so that we are not smitten by the sun by day  
                  or by the moon by night.  
You give us – in the center of all your giving –  
          your only, well-beloved Son.  
You give us your spirit of power, energy, and wisdom.  
          Gifts all without grudging!  
And we receive, because we have no alternative,  
          because we cannot live without your gifts,  
          because we have nothing but what you have given us.  
We receive, carefully and anxiously,  
          worried that there is not enough,  
          of security and safety,  
          of grades or grants or dollars or friends,  
          of sex or beer or SUVs, ...  
          of futures, and so we crave and store up  
                  for rainy futures.  
We receive occasionally when you stagger us  
          and we break beyond anxiety,  
          in gratitude,  
          recognizing that you in your generosity give us  
                  more than enough,  
          and in grateful giving we become our true selves,  
          breathed in the image of your Son.  
So we ponder your generosity and are dazzled.  
We measure our gratitude and our capacity to be generous.  
          We pray your haunting us beyond ourselves,  
          in wonder at your way,  
          in love for the world you love,  
          in praise that transforms our fear,  
          in wonder, love, and praise,  
                  our lives beyond ourselves,  
                  toward you,  
                  a blessing in the world.  
Hear us as we pray in the name of the emptied, exalted One.<sup>1</sup> Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 132.