

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
September 22, 2024  
John 12: 20-26  
*Everything Changes*

We are continuing our Re-Shaped worship series this week. Our first two weeks focused on our inner change and transformation. Rebecca shared from Jeremiah the notion that we are moldable and reshapable, like clay, with God as the Potter. Last week, we focused on the inner transformation through the work of the triune God that we mark with the sign and seal of baptism. We considered how this inner transformation could lead us to be peacemakers in our world. This week we are considering transformation on a larger scale – how we think about re-shaping the church – the body of Christ.

Before I share the scripture, I want to set the stage a bit. Jesus has concluded his ministry in the Galilee region and has traveled to Judea. He has most recently been in Bethany where he raised Lazarus from the dead and proclaimed that “he is resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they will die and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” He has been anointed with fragrant oil by Mary – an act associated with rituals around death and burial. Jesus and the disciples have left Bethany made their triumphal entry into Jerusalem ahead of the Passover feast. The crowds who saw Jesus raise Lazarus continue to travel with him and testify to his deeds. The religious leaders were taking a harder look at him. And Jesus is continuing to teach his disciples to prepare them for the reality of his upcoming death and resurrection. It is in this context we hear these words from John 12 from *The Message*:

There were some Greeks in town who had come up to worship at the Feast. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee: “Sir, we want to see Jesus. Can you help us?” Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip together told Jesus. Jesus answered, “Time’s up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

“Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal. “If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you’ll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment’s notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

I heard a Ted Talk during the early days of the COVID lockdown that has stayed with me over the last few years. It was titled “I let algorithms randomize my life for two years” by computer scientist Max Hawkins.<sup>1</sup> Now many of us are familiar with our streaming music services

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKkl6-HeWXo>

randomly selecting which songs on our playlist we will hear or even receiving book and video suggestions based on other materials we have purchased. But Mr. Hawkins took this a step farther – well actually a big leap farther - and had algorithms make decisions for him over much of his life. He gave up control over what he ate each day, his activities, where he traveled and even where would live. He gave up his free will. Or did he?

Max's experiment in "randomization" came about one morning when he had an epiphany. Every morning, Max woke up full of energy at precisely 7 a.m., stopped at his favorite coffee shop to pick up his favorite coffee (the best in the city), and cycled to work via a carefully optimized route that took him precisely 15 minutes and 37 seconds. He lived in San Francisco – the perfect city for him and worked at Google as a software engineer. The perfect job for him. Everything in Max's life was exactly as he wanted. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't in control. And then he read a research paper about a location-based machine-learning algorithm. According to this research, if you fed the algorithm the coordinates of all the places you'd been for the past week, it would predict with surprising accuracy where you were going to be on the following day.

It bothered Max that his pursuit of the perfect lifestyle made him predictable. And what bothered him even more was the question of what his role in the decision-making process was. Was he really living? Or was he just stuck in a meticulously ordered rut? As Max explains, he decided the best way to break out of the loop was to make his life so unpredictable that even he wouldn't know what was coming next. So he built an app that would randomize his life from where he got his hair cut and where he bought his groceries and by attending random Facebook events. He signed up for a website that eliminated random foods from his diet. He even got a random image from the internet tattooed on his chest. And when he transitioned to freelance work, he let an algorithm choose random cities around the world in which to live.

In his TED Talk, Max shares how this "randomization" opened him up to the beautiful complexity and richness of life. And it made him question even more whether the emphasis on listening to, eating, attending, viewing and interacting with people we already like gives us blind spots? What are we missing because we don't know it's there? And how long before we stop noticing that anything is missing?

Listen carefully, Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over." For Max Hawkins, it took the predictability and perfection of his life dying off, for a rich beauty and deeper appreciation of the connectedness and the complexity of life to be birthed and to bear much fruit.

The words and actions of Jesus challenge us to rethink what we are so sure of, to reconsider what society tells us to value, and to re-form ourselves in the image of God. Throughout the

Gospel of John, Jesus uses metaphors like the grain of wheat dying so that it could bear much fruit, like the temple to be destroyed and raised in three days – Jesus uses these metaphors to turn the table on the expectations of the disciples and religious leaders. Again and again Jesus reminds us that there is a deeper truth than what you see on the surface.

In many Bibles, the heading for our scripture today is “The Hour has Come.” The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. The hour has come. This is the first time Jesus declares that his time has come. At several other places in the gospel, most notably in the wedding story at Cana, Jesus says his hour has not yet come. But now it has and we are at a pivot point. The word is out about Jesus. No longer is Jesus just sharing who he is with the disciples and the religious leaders. Two foreign pilgrims in town for the Passover festival approach Philip and ask “to see Jesus.” Jesus’ very purpose — to make the unseeable God known — is at last being fulfilled, and for this very reason, storm clouds are gathering overhead. This is troubling because for the disciples and the Jewish people, the Messiah was expected to live forever. And again and again Jesus defies expectations.

The hour has come. The hour has come not just for the death of Jesus, but for something more. Jesus goes beyond preparing his disciples for his death, but also prepares them for the empty tomb of Easter morning. The seed dies and it is given new life – it rises up again and bears fruit. The wheat seed is re-formed. Re-shaped into something new. Transformed.

Transformation is a journey of letting the old fall away for something new to emerge, of returning to God’s words again and again, of being drawn into the heart of God. This process of transformation is both internal and communal. And as this scripture reveals it is not only Jesus who experiences this re-formation. Those who follow Jesus must go where Jesus goes. Whoever tries to retain their life will ultimately lose it.

Has the hour come for the church – the big “C”, capital “C” church to be re-shaped and transformed through burying some of the seeds of the past, so that new life can emerge? Ellen Hoekstra shared with me an article from a recent edition of the *New York Times Magazine* on the religious community of the Shakers<sup>2</sup>. The youngest Shaker in the world is 67 years old, and his name is Arnold. He lives alongside Sister June, 86, in a magnificent brick building designed to sleep about 70 — the dwelling house of the last active Shaker village in the world, at Sabbath-day Lake in Maine. While the Shaker’s history as a group who sacrificed individual desires for the collective good, preaching pacifism and the equality of the sexes and races, maybe known to some, the Shakers may be best known for their craftsmanship in furniture making and their music. In a true movement of the Holy Spirit, the handbells will be playing a piece this morning that includes the beautiful Shaker tune “*Tis a Gift to be Simple.*”

---

<sup>2</sup> Jordan Kisner, There Are Only Two Shakers Left. They’ve Still Got Utopia in Their Sights. *New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 2024. Available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/05/magazine/shakers-utopia.html>

The author of the article, Jordan Kisner, spent almost two years interviewing the last two Shakers and their group of friends for this article. She shares how the Shakers “have centuries of experience with the challenges of collective survival, yet like many communities, they are now grappling with what their future might look like. Their existential struggle is a familiar one: How does a community or a culture adapt for sustainability without compromising its foundation?” The remaining Shakers have re-shaped themselves, moving a bit away from their insular life toward sharing their history through education and cultural programming.

Kisner concludes, “A concept of survival and flourishing that isn’t primarily concerned with linear time or material gains may be the most radical thing about this historically radical American religion, and the one most resonant with a world that is experiencing, constantly, its own existential threats and calamities. It is obvious by now that everyone and everything is dying and living all at the same time, that failure and hope are all mixed up....”<sup>3</sup>

And Jesus says “Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.”

In the words of preparation in the bulletin, I share a provocative quote from author Debie Thomas’ article *Which church is dying?*. She says,

“It is one thing to mourn empty pews and shuttered Sunday school classrooms and quite another to call time of death on the mystical body of Christ. Call me naive if you’d like, but I’m not quite ready to do the latter. Why? Because the hopes, hungers, losses, and loves that have brought people to their knees for two millennia are still alive and well. Whether we use religious language to describe it or not, we are starving for coherence, for awe, for connection, for meaning. We are still hungry for spaces, rituals, and rhythms that will help us beat despair and recover wonder. We need questions worth pondering and truths worth trusting. We still need containers spacious enough to hold our pain.”<sup>4</sup>

I echo Thomas’ insistence that the world is eager for connection – so desperate that we are seeking connection to others by limiting our interactions to those who are like-minded, out fear we might be rejected for coloring outside the lines. We want so desperately to feel like we are part of something that we make our world smaller and smaller, so we are marked as

---

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Debie Thomas. *Which Church is Dying?* *Christian Century*, September 2024 issue. Available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/which-church-dying?>

one of the tribe – we belong. We are comfortable. We fit in. We are not challenged. And “we” is the church.

And as Thomas says, “This comfortable church is the one many of us in the West can’t let go of. The church we are so often bent on resuscitating is a church that operates from the center of power, wielding broad influence in the culture. It’s a church packed to the rafters every Sunday, not necessarily with people who are hungry for Jesus but with people who recognize that regular attendance offers them valuable cultural capital. When people mourn the death of the church, it is often this funeral they’re attending...the true question is whether the church will have the courage and humility to become once again what God has always called it to be: a seed that willingly falls into the ground and dies so that new life can nourish the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Are we ready to ask the question at PCO: *What can be buried so that new fruit springs up?* Can we ask the questions that Max Hawkins asked when he realized how predictable his life was: What are we missing because we don’t know it’s there? And how long before we stop noticing that anything is missing?

For the people of Jesus’ time, death on the cross was not what people expected of a messiah. It was dishonor. It was defeat. In the words of the protagonists of my favorite movie, Bill and Ted, “it was most non-triumphant.” And yet this death led to light and life in ways the disciples could never have imagined. Can we embrace that possibility, that what looks like on the surface is a failure or defeat is actually going to bring us new life? To embrace the words we will hear sung later in our service “In our end is our beginning; In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory, Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.” **Join me prayer....**

---

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*