

Homily for Easter
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Jesus said, "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."

We discover in this passage a philosophy of life. Easter is about living, about living reckless in our love. That is what Jesus did and what Jesus taught. He shared his understanding that life is not bounded in the way we expect. He pointed to the breadth of what life holds for us, and the depth of what life opens for us. He knew that only by appreciating life's abundance would we come to live abundantly.

There was a massive oak tree that hung over my childhood home and shaded half the front yard. That great canopy made the porch especially welcoming on sunny days. From that comfortable place we could watch the squirrels gather their food, and after a while we did too--for our fanciful childhood restaurant. The large leathery oak leaves we dipped into the brook and breaded with sand to make fried fish. The acorns we cracked between rocks to get to the nutmeats that we ground into paste. With water from the brook it became doughy enough to be transformed into rolls and cakes. All of this was beautifully plated on flat rocks and slabs of birch bark, often accompanied by a salad of dandelions, clover, and violets. That oak tree was constantly creating and we created along with it. We recognized its abundance and we used it to live.

Forty years later I was saddened to learn my mother had that tree cut down. The acorns had become a nuisance, and the branches overhanging the house had become a hazard. Walking to her car with acorns underfoot had become frightening. She worried a fall would break her hip, and she worried a branch would crash through the roof of her house. For her the two hundred year old tree had become a liability, one of the few she could control. Upset about its loss I found my adult-self explaining that it must have been a mast year for the tree, a year when it produces one hundred times the seeds—apologizing for its generosity. My child-self was horrified too, at the realization that what had always made my home and yard special had been killed unnecessarily. That majestic oak had so generously and lovingly given of itself. It had been reckless in its love. Year after year it shed its old self and was renewed with leaves and acorns. Year after year it did not die, but found ways to live on: to feed and comfort, to beautify and vivify.

Kabir, the fifteenth century mystic and poet writes: "You know the seed is in the horse chestnut tree, and inside the tree there are the blossoms of the tree, the chestnuts...and the shade." Sometimes we can look that deeply. Sometimes we know how to look past the structure, to break it open and see what's inside. It takes imagination and faith to hold the seed and see the tree it will become, to imagine the flowers and their fragrance, and the many seeds it will produce—and even the shade.

This process begins with death. The seed must die to realize its potential. It must go into the dark earth and be broken open by a force it does not understand and cannot imagine. It must do so to become something more. Death for the seed is not failure. It is an opening to new possibility. It is hope beyond hope.

Now, that seed could maintain its form for a while. Perhaps no animal would eat it and no children would crush it. Perhaps it would never be planted by some person's weight pushing it into the soft ground. But it would rot eventually, and never know the fullness of what it could become. Or would it? Life is more incredible than that. For even in rotting it would add nutrients to the soil for other trees and plants to take up. A seed's purpose is to offer itself, to continually and completely offer itself. It can do nothing less.

Let's imagine Kabir's seed again, the brown horse chestnut with its spiny casing that breaks open to reveal the smooth strength inside. When planted, it becomes a tall and beautiful tree with flowers that look like lilacs pointed skyward. Those flowers will be pollinated to create more seeds that will rain down and feed those who need feeding. And there will be shade created by its massive branches and broad leaves. The tree has so many ways of being alluring and nurturing, so many ways of providing comfort and being restorative.

Life has so many ways of providing comfort and being restorative, and that doesn't end with death. The seed shows us how that is where it begins. Easter is the holy day when this teaching is emphasized. When we acknowledge that to be more than a seed we must be willing to break out of our shells, dig our roots deep into the ground, and grow toward the light. As Jesus says, we must let go of what we thought we were, reckless in our love, to be forever real and eternal.

The death of the seed enables the birth of the tree and the growth of potential. The death of the seed enables the flowering of beauty, the seeds of compassion, and the shade for some hot soul looking for relief. The death of the seed offers the fullness of life. We see this in nature all around us, and let's remember we are nature too, we are participants in this dance of transformation and restoration. May this be the Easter we pause to notice. May this be the Easter we find comfort in the shade of life's possibility. May this be the Easter we rejoice at life's ongoing creative embrace.