

## “Seed Words”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

When I visited my daughter’s kindergarten class in the fall, I saw a wonderful display covering the wall of something her class calls “Snap Words.” They are words that appear most frequently in English reading, at least at the beginning level, and recognition of these words provide the basis for English literacy: words like the, is, are, you, me, he, she, what, who, etc.

As I get ready to go to The Philippines on vacation with my family in April, I am trying to recall what the “snap words” are for Tagalog. It certainly helps that my in-laws speak Tagalog as much as they do English in my presence. However, for some reason the words that stick in my head all have to do with either food and bodily functions. But I do know that capturing enough words in any language to either read or speak with meaning it is not an easy task.

If I look a little bit rough today, it is because I came straight from the church’s Confirmation Retreat at Camp Johnsonburg, where our youth joined Presbyterian teens from the region to explore some of the basic words of our faith and what they mean. Instead of calling these “Snap Words,” I will call them *seed* words; for these are the words that, we hope, will take root in them, inspire meaning through their own unique lenses, and grow into something that helps them reach deeply into God’s love and to blossom as they branch outwardly to engage the world around them.

Words we heard over the weekend were: salvation, God, faith, doubt, community, belonging, Jesus, Love...

God tells Jeremiah, "I will write these words upon their heart, and I will be their God and they shall be my people." This is the primary seed of faith I hope our youth can discover through their engagement within and from our church: a mutual sense of love for God, and a knowledge of God's love for us.

These are the seeds of our faith. They are not the only ones; perhaps the seeds that most nurtured your faith are not the ones discussed today.

Jesus tells us in John's gospel, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, then it will bear much fruit..."

Seeds aren't technically dead. They are dormant, and they neither give off energy, nor consume energy. But when they descend to the earth, where they are surrounded by the nutrients of the soil and the water's moisture, the embryo inside the seed becomes animated; it begins to shed its skin and the life within emerges.

Jesus, we believe, was technically and officially dead after he was crucified. But the vitality within him was something neither the cross nor the tomb could not consume forever. It was in his death that he was able to shed the shell of domination and violence that sought to kill him, and emerge with something full of vitality, that could transcend or rise above even the dealings of death.

How do we get to that vitality that God has set within us? Do we really have to die in order for that life to emerge or bloom?

In the picture I chose for the front of the church bulletin this Sunday, we see a drawing by Cerazo Barredo, a liturgical artist from the Latin American context. He considers himself a liberation theologian, which means his search for holy meaning comes from seeing God at work in the lives and struggles of the poor and oppressed, and their holy quest for liberation. If you look closely at the picture, you will see it is an interpretation of the passage from John's gospel, but in a tragic way. Here are the bodies of people who have been shot and killed, and they are lying before several crosses. The scene evokes the political violence throughout Latin America in the 1980's and 90's— often in collaboration with US military and economic interests— that was responsible for huge numbers of people, mostly peasant farmers, who were killed or disappeared. These victims included church people who were moved by the messages of Jesus and the prophets to work for justice and resist oppression. The artist depicts growth coming out of these bodies— grains of wheat that stubbornly take root and bloom out of the death and despair. This growth is an act of resistance against the powers that would deal death and despair.

It is a message that speaks to today's context as well, as we survey the loss that has been caused by gun violence in this country. I am glad to see in our youth the growth of resistance. Last week I stood on the sidelines in support of the youth-led walk out, both at Leonia Middle School and Leonia High School. Several of our church kids were part of this walk out. The teenagers made speeches that brought me to tears; their passion and conviction gives me hope and motivation to ensure their safer futures.

I got an email last week in response to my weekly email blast with scripture reference. The email questioned the concept that we must die in order to find new life. The sender had important and challenging questions for me! Certainly we do not want to celebrate victimhood; nor do we want to glorify suffering for suffering's sake. I don't think suffering is the goal; however, I have deep faith in God's power to create life and hope out of situations of death and despair.

But I also noticed something just by being around teenagers for the weekend. It is amazing what youth can teach you if you are willing to be present with them and truly listen. I observed them as they nervously entered a room of 60 teenagers they didn't know, each with their own church's culture. Together, our youth found the furthest corner of the room to sit, and the dismay on their faces when they looked into their phones—a safety blanket for anyone who feels socially uncomfortable—realized the place did not have WiFi made me anxious for them too. I remember how awkward it can feel to enter a room where you worry you might be out of place. I know some of them risked a lot in even coming to Camp. I hoped their experience would prove worthwhile, but Friday night I wasn't so sure.

But after a couple of icebreaker games, and some more meaningful conversations in small groups that mixed our Leonia tribe with other church kids, as well as some powerful sharing modeled by our keynote speakers, I could see the shells our kids had put up start to fall away. By the second day, the youth were engaging some deep questions of faith that had not before seemed possible. Not to mention that some who had not realized how brave they could be whizzed through the trees on a high and fast zip line!

Adolescence is a time when walls and vulnerability are both so easily on display. And the kids actually told me about what it feels like. They shared the heap of expectations they feel, and told me how hard they work to try to make themselves fit into those expectations. They also shared how hard it is to peel away the shell that in some cases protects them from outside harm, but in other ways prevents them from expressing pain and vulnerability. The chance to emerge from these shells can help them transform their hurt into something that can blossom.

Jonathan, their confirmation mentor, and I agreed that this is not just hard for kids to do; it is hard for adults too. So I deeply admire our kids for

finding ways to come to that space where they can shed a hard layer and discover the vitality that God has set within them.

Adults and youth alike can take the chance in Lent to explore what shells we bring with us. Are they entombing us? Are they keeping us safe? What would it take for those shells to fall away? What would it take to expose our hearts to God so that God can write God's covenant of love on them?

We do not have to worry that we will be nothing without our shells. For we are already known within by a God who has written God's covenant on our hearts. We are God's people, and God is our God. I believe something good can grow from that. In fact, I stake my faith on it. Amen.