

Way back at the beginning of Jesus' public life, he attended a wedding at Cana where the wine ran out, and his mother pointedly drew his attention to the problem. "Woman, what have you to do with me?" he responded. "My hour has not yet come." Then he changed water into wine, and it was the first of his "signs," signs that he was the one sent from God.

Today his hour comes. Amidst the commotion of the tragic-comic triumphal royal procession, some "Greeks"—apparently foreigners, maybe Hellenized Jews but maybe Gentiles not from Jerusalem—approach Philip and asked to see Jesus. Upon hearing of their request, Jesus answers, "*The hour has come* for the Human One to be glorified." "By the term "Greeks," John indicates the ever-expanding reach of Jesus—beyond Galilee, beyond Judea, beyond Judaism. The one whom we do not know is now drawing all the nations and all peoples to himself."ⁱ The hour has come for a full revelation of Jesus' identity. And that identity is forged as diverse people are drawn together in him.

Jesus continues by pointing out that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but in dying, splitting open, it bears much fruit. What happens when a grain "dies" is that it loses its autonomy, or its sleek singleness. An ungerminated seed is whole and beautiful, but static—it's at a dead end until it falls into the soil and breaks. But nobody wants to break. Or die.

We've reflected all season long on shadow, which evokes that which we do not wish to see. In Jungian terms, the shadow is the parts of ourselves that we reject and try to hide from ourselves and others. Of course, suppressing the shadow leads to more harm than good. Often the shape it takes is that we assign our rejected

characteristics to others, foreigners, people with different identities. Then we can feel that in our distinctness from them, we are safe. But in reality, we are enacting a pattern of brokenness that is not life-giving. As Jesus says, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” He’s saying that those who seek self-preservation at the cost of full humanity cannot live fully. Those who “hate their life,” that is, let go of self-preservation or perfection, live “eternally.” We have to incorporate our shadows, our fragility, our mortality, our kinship with “other” into our understanding of who we are.

I read a moving account by the Rev. Debra Metzgar Shew, an Episcopal priest, of working at the site of the fallen World Trade Center shortly after 9/11. St. Paul’s Chapel was right there, and offered a “respite ministry at the church for rescue workers, for those who worked out on “the pile” -- as they called it -- 24 hours a day, and who came within the quiet walls of the church for a hot meal, some sleep, fresh supplies, a place to pray, a chance to talk, or a chance not to talk.”ⁱⁱ She says of the site, “The whole world seemed gray and lifeless. Words failed immediately. It was death before your eyes and under your feet and in the air. It was hatred and evil in visible form, form that you could literally taste and touch and see and smell.”

But inside St. Paul’s Chapel, workers and volunteers were discovering “that what all that destruction outside had torn down was not simply the walls of the World Trade Center but the walls of division that we create between ourselves.” They were discovering that what they all had in common was their mortality. Facing their own vulnerability and finiteness, an invulnerable and infinite love emerged. Life emerged.

Debra says that Jesus shows us that death *precedes* life. Life does not come before death, but death must come before life is possible.

We had arrived with our sense of helplessness, arrived with our limits, arrived with a sense of dread and death. And what we found was each other. What we found was life. What we found were cops and firefighters working as one, iron workers and crane operators forgetting unions and creating teams. Chiropractors and restaurant owners and Holocaust survivors and Juilliard students ladling out soup and restoring tired backs and stringing violin music into the air. Priests handing out morsels of bread and sips of wine and cups of hot chocolate, speaking silence out on the pile where firefighters dug faithfully by hand. Priests and rabbis and pastors praying across the abyss and blessing charred remains, not knowing if the person we prayed over was someone of our own tradition or none, praying only that the one God who loves us all would provide rest and blessing and the final journey home.

[We found] that in facing death, in dying to our fear of it, we emerged more alive. That the freedom to live without the divisions we humans create was an enormous life-giving gift.

What I am calling the shadow may be a false self that's made up only of the bright and attractive things we think make us lovable. Or it may be the pristine, autonomous, kernel of self defined as Not Them and Not Them Either. Or it may be our own literal mortality, our tendency to decay and succumb to disease, that we fight with vitamins, distractions, and denial. Whatever we think will annihilate us if we let it, that's what I'm calling the shadow. And according to Jesus, that is exactly what we must allow in before we can live. Our finiteness, Debra Shew discovered, becomes the place to receive infinity, and if you stand at the place of death, you stand also at the gate to life.

In the crucifixion, God reconciled Godself to humanity not by denying the suffering of the world, but by entering into it. The glorification of which John speaks is not God imposing a death sentence on Jesus as if some monstrous transaction had

to take place for us to be reconciled to God. The glorification is in Jesus' identifying with us in our susceptibility to annihilation—and in embracing our fragility, blossoming into communion.

The Muslim poet Rumi wrote,

The way of love is not
a subtle argument.
The door there
is devastation.
Birds make great sky-circles
of their freedom.
How do they learn that?
They fall, and falling,
they are given wings.

Let us pray: God, who has woven paradox into the universe: we struggle against the desire eliminate the possibility of the other, the "Greek," irrupting into our tightly orchestrated scenario. We avoid the deeper confrontation with the identity you give us that speaks to truth deep within each one of us. Seeing Jesus fall, and thus be given wings, we ask you for hearts that are reconciled, when we shall all know God from the least to the greatest, from the insider to the outsider, from national to foreigner, from false self to true self. Amen.

ⁱ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dirk-g-lange/john-12-20-33-who-am-i_b_1368540.html

ⁱⁱ http://day1.org/521-sacred_ground