

2024 Lent 5B

When I was a child, my sister Linda had me convinced that if I swallowed even ONE apple seed I would die from cyanide poisoning.

I have since learned that there really isn't enough cyanide to do you any harm, and the shell around the seed would protect you anyway, most likely pass right through you whole. But I'll confess that I still won't eat all the way down to the core so that I don't swallow one of those seeds, and when I see a child with one in his mouth, my first instinct is to rush over and make him spit it out.

One tiny little seed leads us to a shiny apple...imagine all that potential, locked up in that tiny seed! And just one apple produces six or seven seeds—how many apple cores have you thrown away in your life time? All those potential little apples!

But it's not that direct, is it? It's not one seed makes one apple. No, it's one seed might potentially make an apple TREE. And that doesn't happen overnight; there's a process, and it takes time.

First—the seed has to fall to the ground and “die,” to use Jesus' phrase. Water finds a crack and seeps in to the tender kernel inside, which expands in response. The outer hull breaks apart and is left behind in the soil. The seed has to let go of the safety of that outer husk and let

itself be changed, stretched, unfolded, pushing out toward the sun, whose warmth can be felt all the way down in the darkness. All of that work happens underground. Sometimes we don't even know it's happening; sometimes we forget that a seed was planted at all and are surprised when we see a little green thing growing.

By the time it has broken through the surface of the dirt, it has already been through a tremendous transformation. But even then, there is so much more work to do. Only after a long time—I read that from seed to apple-producing tree takes at least six years—do you begin to see any fruit. Those who are impatient or short-sighted would have long since given up and moved on to some other venture, or decided it's easier to just go to the grocery store and buy an apple. Let someone else do all the hard work of tending an orchard.

All of it depends on the willingness of that seed to let itself be broken apart, changed. The seed has to let go of the "life" it had in order to receive a new life.

When Jesus uses the image of the grain falling to the ground and dying, he is speaking specifically of the Crucifixion—that in order for him to fulfill his purpose, he will have to die on a cross and be buried. The new life, the life of the Resurrection will be as different from his old life as this seed is from a tree. He is trying to prepare his disciples for the hard reality they are about

to face: things are not going to go the way they expect them to.

There is something in that for us as well. Things don't always go the way we expect them to go. We think we're safe and secure in our little husk. Nothing can harm us. And suddenly we find ourselves in a totally new situation; our outer shell is breaking apart, things feel very uncertain. All the ways in which we defined ourselves, all the things we KNEW ourselves to be are being shaken up, shaken apart. We feel ourselves sinking into unfamiliar territory. It's frightening—terrifying, even.

But if we trust in God and God's love for us, we just might find that it's okay. We discover that God is changing us, reshaping us, transforming us into something new, something that can bear fruit for others to enjoy. Fruit that will create new seeds for future generations.

How does God do this, really? How does God break through the old husk that's keeping us isolated, stagnant?

Jeremiah gives us an image in today's reading—God breaks through all that hardness, and writes God's own law—the law of love—on our hearts. For the people hearing this, the heart was not considered the center of emotion, it was the core of our being—our mind, our heart, our soul.

Jeremiah wrote these words to people who believed they were *done*, that there was nothing left for them. They had been torn away from the land and taken into Exile in Babylon, they had lost everything that mattered to them. Up until this point, Jeremiah has been more focused on trying to make them acknowledge that they had some responsibility for the way things were. They had been faithless, they had been selfish. They had not kept covenant with God, and these were the consequences. They were old used up apple cores. They had nothing left to offer.

Or so they thought. God could see that there were still seeds there, the potential for a new relationship with God. One that would not be written on tablets that they looked at, but one that would be written on our souls. We wouldn't be able to walk away and forget, because it would always be with us. God would inscribe this new covenant on the very core of our being, and it would be with us forever.

That inscription starts something new growing, it makes it possible for us to become what God had always intended us to be. God doesn't want us to live our lives as SEEDS of Christians; God wants us to grow into beautiful productive full-grown trees that bear fruit, the fruit of the Spirit.

What old, hard shells is God offering to break open for you? What seeds have been planted in you, that now

need to be given help to grow and become something beautiful? This is the fifth Sunday of Lent, the last one before Palm Sunday. We're nearly done—and yet it's never too late to start asking God to do some "Lent" work in you, even now. Invite God to shake you up, break you open, start something new in you, so that you bear the fruit that will last.

Amen