

SEEDS OF DUST, SEEDS OF HEAVEN

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1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

Our reading for today from 1 Corinthians concludes with these words from Paul,

*Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,
nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*

Paul writes these words in response to the question that has been pondered by every poet as well as every person who has ever walked the face of this earth: “What happens to us when we die?” Anyone who has observed a death or stood in front of a casket has wondered about the deceased, “Where are they now?” They also wonder, “What will happen to me when my time comes?” Any child that has lost a pet has asked this question as they struggle with the experience of death and loss. (And just for the record, all dogs do go to heaven. Cats? That’s another story.)

The Apostle Paul established the Christian congregation in the city of Corinth. When his work was done, he left Corinth and moved on to his next mission opportunity. However, he continued to keep in touch with the members of that congregation through letters and word-of-mouth. In Paul’s absence that church experienced a great deal of internal conflict, and they appealed to Paul to help them settle the issues that plagued them. One of the most pressing of these issues concerned the notion of Christian resurrection. The idea of resurrection was at odds with the larger culture, and the Christians in Corinth had a difficult time explaining resurrection to non-Christians. They also had a hard time accepting the idea themselves. The concept of resurrection was simply too icky to contemplate.

It was icky because people in that day suffered from poor health and disease. Fifty percent of children did not make it to their tenth birthday. People routinely died from simple infections. Most disease was untreatable. Many people grappled with hunger and mal-nutrition. In short, people suffered. For Christians to preach that they were promised a bodily resurrection to eternal life was not all that appealing. Who would want live forever in a damaged, aching, broken-down body? If one were to die from a falling stone that crushed their leg, would they want to endure eternity with the same battered leg? And bad eyesight, and rotten teeth, and kidney stones?

When Paul preaches about the bodily resurrection, people balked. They wanted something better.

The fifteenth chapter of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians addresses this concept of resurrection. Paul begins this section of his letter with a reminder of his core teaching: Christ died for our sins, Christ was buried, Christ was raised on the

third day, and then he appeared to his followers, including Paul himself. Paul argues in this letter that if the people claim that Christ is raised then they cannot deny the resurrection. You can't have one without the other. If there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised. In the Christian faith, resurrection is non-negotiable. If Christ has not been raised, then, as Paul writes, *faith is futile*. However, Paul reminds us, we do believe that Christ is raised and so we do believe in the resurrection.

Paul then addresses the questions the Corinthians had been asking him. Specifically, they want to know, *How are the dead raised?* and *With what kind of body do they come?* In other words, How does this resurrection thing work? After resurrection, what happens to us? What will we be like? This is where we find ourselves in our reading for today—with these two questions.

Paul does not exhibit much patience with these questions because he calls the people *fools* for even asking them. It should be obvious to them. But, as an answer to their questions, he offers the analogy of the seeds. Consider a seed, he says, maybe a seed of wheat. It is just a bare seed. Plant it in the ground. What happens? It grows. However, to grow into something new—a plant—the seed itself must die. The old seed is lost forever, and something new emerges from it. Unless the seed dies, it will not transform into something new. Paul then tells the Corinthians that their bodies are like these seeds. The old body must die for the new body to grow. It is God, and God alone, who determines what the new bodies will be like. Each new body is different, just as each of us is different.

What sets the new bodies apart from the old is that the old bodies are perishable—they have a shelf life. The newly raised bodies are imperishable—they are eternal. The old bodies are imperfect; they are dishonorable, weak, and physical. The raised bodies are raised in glory, in power; they are spiritual.

Yes, the people in Corinth have every right to have questions. Their resurrected selves will be real, but different from the bodies they know now.

Paul shifts gears and makes a comparison between Christ and Adam. If you have studied Paul's letter to the Romans, you will be familiar with this line of thought.

Adam—the first person—represents our present, physical world. Paul calls him the *first Adam*. Paul considers Jesus to be the *last Adam*. Adam represents mortality. In Jesus, we find eternity. The first Adam was *from the earth*. He was a *man of dust*. The second Adam *is from heaven*. We are descendants of the man of dust. But it is Christ that calls us toward heaven. Paul concludes with the verse that I quoted at the beginning, *flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable*. In other words, our earthly bodies

are not meant to inhabit God's kingdom. Something different is required. We must shed these bodies which are imperfect, dishonorable, weak, and physical.

Paul's discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians is in response to a specific question from the people. However, it is part of a much larger conversation about who we are as Christians. The real issue is not death and dying; the real issue is living. How do we as Christians choose to live? Unless we live lives centered on Christ, then any talk of resurrection is futile. In our daily lives, what types of seeds are we planting? Are we planting thorns and weeds or something more desirable, more holy? How we live now reflects on our life eternal. In these bodies, we cannot enter God's kingdom. However, a resurrected body is not the key to the kingdom; the real key is how we lead our daily lives.

Do we live with God's word guiding our hearts? Do we live as disciples of Christ? Do we follow God's commandments? Do we shape our lives around the words of Jesus, for example, the words we find in Luke's gospel:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you... Do to others as you would have them do to you.

The kingdom of God is not here. It is to come. And yet if we live authentic Christian lives then we will begin to gain a taste of God's kingdom here and now. That is new life; that is resurrection.

Amen.