

Sermon: Living through Death
Text: John 12:20 – 33
Date: March 29, 2009 AM
Place: Jesup First UMC

Years ago, when Betty Crocker first began selling cake mixes, their first product said: “*Just add water.*” So, all you had to do was add water to the mix and boom, you could have a perfect, delicious cake every time. And guess what? It bombed! Nobody bought it. So, the company did a study to find out why. And what they discovered was that people thought it was too easy. These women were used to baking cakes from scratch and it just didn’t seem right to “just add water.” So Betty Crocker changed the formula requiring customers to add water and one egg and the rest is history.ⁱ

You know, sometimes I wonder if we have watered down Christianity so much that nobody really wants it. We all want lots of church activities ... as long as they fit into our busy schedules. We all want dynamic worship services ... as long as they don’t go past 12:00. We all want to be part of the church ... as long as we don’t really have to make a big commitment to anything. And we in the church – over and over again – keep trying to water it down, to make it easier and easier and in the end, it bombs!

John tells us that during the last week of His life, Jesus spent a lot of time in the Temple. And one day, while He and the disciples were in the Temple, some Greeks came looking for Him and they asked Philip if they could see Jesus and Philip found Andrew and together, they brought these Greeks to Jesus. Now, we would expect Jesus to be excited. After all, His

reputation had spread outside of Palestine to Greek-speaking Jewish proselytes. But instead, Jesus immediately proclaims the arrival of His hour; it is now time for Jesus to be glorified. Instead of talking about the expanding of His ministry; He talked about dying. He said to love your life is to lose it and to hate your life is to keep it. How strange! Just when Jesus is at the place of His greatest popularity, He starts talking about dying. What are we to make of this?

Well, first, Jesus saw the presence of these Greeks as a sign of His future. Now, already in John's Gospel, Jesus had said on four different occasions: "*My hour has not yet come*" and now, His immediate reaction is: "*The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*"

Now, Jesus knew what His future was. Oh, He could have taken the easy way. He could have preached a "prosperity gospel". He could have befriended the religious leaders instead of confronting them. And with the crowds that were already gathering around Him, He would have been everybody's example of success and greatness. But He knew what His future was and the fact that His message had spread beyond the borders of Palestine was a sign to Him that it was time.

Second, Jesus knew His death would expand the Kingdom! He said: "*The truth is a kernel of wheat must be planted in the soil. Unless it dies it will be alone – a single seed. But its death will produce many new kernels – a plentiful harvest of new lives.*"

Here is a man who had 12 disciples, an extended group of 70 and a handful of women. When He preached and healed throughout Galilee, He attracted crowds by the thousands perhaps even ten thousand. And yet, He died alone. His disciples deserted Him like sheep being scattered on a hillside. But within a few years of His death, the church in Jerusalem was 10,000 strong. Within 25 years of His death, the Gospel had reached Rome. Within 300 years of His death, Christianity was named the official religion of the Roman Empire.

If Jesus had lived another 30 years, He would have still been a traveling preacher in Palestine, but with His death came the Kingdom's greatest growth.

Third, Jesus' death becomes an invitation for all to come and die. Jesus said: *"Those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life will keep it for eternity. All those who want to be my disciples must come and follow me."* Now, that sounds like a lot of fun, doesn't it? Yet, Jesus never promised us an easy path. In fact, God's way is often the hardest and most painful way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said when Jesus calls someone: *"He bids them come and die."*

Now, sometimes this death is a physical death. Hebrews 11 tells us about the great heroes of the faith, men and women whose complete trust in God lead them to do great things for Him. But it also tells us about those heroes who paid the ultimate sacrifice; it says: *"Others trusted God and were tortured, preferring to die rather than turn from God and be free. They placed their hope in the resurrection to a better life."* You

see, Jesus never promises His followers a bed of roses. Some suffer and some even die. In fact, more Christians have died for their faith in Jesus Christ in the last 100 years than in the previous 1900 years combined.

But there's a second kind of death that every Christian experiences: it is a spiritual death. In his letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul wrote: **"For I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives within me. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave His life for me."** Obviously, Paul was still alive physically, but he considered himself dead, crucified with Christ.

Now, what does spiritual death look like?

Spiritual death moves us from selfishness to self-giving. One of the most difficult lessons of the Christian life is servanthood, because every since the Garden of Eden, we've been concerned about me. By nature, we are very selfish creatures. But Jesus invites us to die to self, that we might live to Christ. He asks us to stop serving ourselves so that we might serve Him by serving others. So, we can die to our own egos for the sake of others. We can give up our own agendas for the sake of God's agenda. We can give up what really makes me happy, for the sake of winning one lost person to the Kingdom.

So Jesus says, "Come and die" and move from selfishness to a life of self-giving.

Spiritual death moves us from slavery to sin and death to freedom in Christ. In his letter to the Church at Rome, Paul makes this claim over and over. He

says: *"You no longer have any obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do."* You see, when you were crucified with Christ, you died to sin and sin no longer has any control over you. *"My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not in part but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul."*

So Jesus says, "Come and die" and move from slavery to sin to freedom in Christ.

Spiritual death moves us from existing to really living. Now, this freedom from sin and death sets us free to really live. Jesus said: *"The thief comes but to steal, kill and destroy, but I have come that you might have life and that you live it to its fullest."* Paul describes it this way: *"The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you. And just as He raised Christ from the dead, He will give life to your mortal body by the same Spirit living within you."*

You see, it really is the cross. O the wonderful cross, O the wonderful cross bids me come and die and find that I might truly live. So Jesus invites us, "Come and die" and move from just existing to really living.

The cross! It is the symbol of Jesus' fulfillment of God's plan. It is the symbol of the explosion of the Kingdom of God around the world. And it is Jesus' invitation to us: "Come and Die."

Oh I am crucified with Christ and yet I live.
Not I but Christ who lives within me.
His love will never ask for more than I can give.
For it's not my strength but His.
There's no greater sacrifice
For I am crucified with Christ and yet I live.

