

Creation and Destruction

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Agnes Denes, Wheatfield – A Confrontation

Preaching on:

John 12:20–33

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.” What a strange illustration—to imagine a death and burial as a seed being planted in the ground, and connecting these two concepts which seem to be total opposites: death and growth. Are death and growth really connected? What does Jesus mean?

The simplest way to interpret this profound statement is to explain it away. It’s obvious what Jesus means, isn’t it? He’s talking about himself—his impending death and coming resurrection, which are unique to him alone. But that ignores what Jesus is actually saying here. He’s not saying, “I am the seed...” What’s so startling about Jesus’ words here is that he’s making a universal argument based on natural principles. Yes, he’s talking about his own coming death, but he’s framing it as an example to us of something that is more broadly true of all creation.

On Friday night, John and Janet Dobbs hosted an event for the Ministry of Adult Education. The topic of discussion for the evening was suggested and very ably introduced to us by Rita Ellertson—the recent Alabama Supreme Court ruling that frozen embryos in test tubes should be considered children and the very real fallout for people and families undergoing In Vitro Fertilization treatments in that state.

Essentially, if embryos are children, there can be no IVF because being an embryo is so inherently risky. Just to be clear—an embryo is not a fetus. The frozen embryos ruled to be children in Alabama are at the earliest stages of development—something like six to ten cells. It's estimated that 50% of embryos don't make it in natural human reproduction and the odds may be worse in reproductive medicine. Declaring these little fragile miracles to be little fragile children, means no one can risk making a miracle with them at all.

As the conversation delved into the broader societal understanding of when life begins and the state's role in regulating reproductive health, many of us struggled. Calling an embryo a child seemed to go too far but calling an embryo a piece of property seemed to be missing something. Treating the six to ten cells of an embryo no differently than six to ten cells off your elbow seemed unacceptable but calling a freezer full of embryos a “cryogenic nursery,” as the Alabama Supreme Court ruling did, seemed absurd. If we think that embryos are special, even sacred, but then don't protect them from all harm, are we just hypocrites?

I don't think so. Throughout his ministry Jesus recognizes the sacred fragility of life. Why is life so fragile? Why is it so easily lost? We can't answer that question, but we have recognized over the millennia that the fragility and fleetingness of life is strangely part of what makes life so worth living.

Why are embryos so fragile? Why are so many lost? We can't answer that question. But we can recognize that our desire to protect them from being lost could lead us to protecting them from actually living. Of course we're emotionally invested in them. Of course we're rooting for them. Of course we'll protect them from truly bad actors who don't recognize them for what they are. But we cannot protect embryos from their own fragile destiny—from life. Trying to make it in this world is always a risk. Embryos are sacred to me not because they're children, but because they're embryos—fragile little miracles carrying the hopes of new life risking everything for the next generation.

Sherry Brabham, on Friday night, made the point that we focus so much on the virtues and beauty of creation in the Christian tradition that maybe we don't leave any room for the possibility of the sacredness of destruction and death as a part of the process of creation itself. When Jesus told the disciples he would be crucified, Peter rebuked him. Don't say that! You're sacred! Sacred things must be protected! Jesus rebukes Peter right back. You have your mind on human ways, not on divine ways. It's a human tendency to want to preserve the sacred from destruction. But from a God's eye point of view, sacred things must fulfill their sacred purposes—and (though we don't think of it much in Christianity) perhaps even destruction and loss and death have an important and even a sacred role in

creation, in life, in reproduction.

A religion that maybe has a lot to teach us about the theology of destruction is Hinduism. In Christianity, of course, we have a Trinity: God (the creator), Christ (the redeemer or savior), and the Holy Spirit (the sustainer). In Hinduism, there's a Trimurti of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer), and Shiva (the destroyer). So, in both the Trinity and the Trimurti we have the concepts of creating and sustaining. But the third concept is different. Christianity has salvation (through Christ) and Hinduism has destruction (through Shiva).

But could it be that these are just two different perspectives on a larger, unified concept? Shiva's destruction isn't just annihilation but a necessary precondition for renewal and regeneration. Through destruction, Shiva paves the way for a new cycle of creation. And Christ's salvation came through an act of destruction (the crucifixion), which led to a renewal and regeneration (the resurrection).

The imagery of the crucifixion makes us very uncomfortable. Many of us feel like if God is all powerful then God could have found another way to save the world other than through a brutal execution. We want from God the version of life where everything is always on the up and up—always growth, never destruction; always success, never loss; always resurrection, never death. Why are 50% of embryos lost? Why so much waste? Why so much destruction? Why did Jesus tell us he had to be crucified? Why such violence? Why death? We can't answer those questions, but we can hopefully come to recognize that these are inherent truths of life we love—that reproduction requires risk, that living requires dying, that resurrection requires crucifixion, and that creation, salvation, and destruction are intimately connected. Hoping for exceptions to these rules or trying to make the law reflect our human desires rather than God's ways denies the beauty of the fragile, sacred, miraculous lives we are living.

Romey, my four-year-old son, has been asking questions lately about death—kind of skirting around it, trying to figure things out. He was asking me some questions yesterday while we were snuggling at bedtime. And I asked him, "Honey, are you afraid of dying?" And he said, "I am NOT telling you!" "Why not, honey?" "Because it's too scary, and if something is too scary, you don't talk about it." Oh boy.

And so I told him, "No, honey, when you're having big feelings, that's when it's most important to talk about it because that's how you deal with those feelings. That's how you learn. That's how you grow." And (miracle of miracles) my four-year-old (going on 14) actually decided to talk to his old man about something.

And in the course of that conversation, I suddenly got scared. I was suddenly initiating my son into the reality of life and death. I felt his innocence slipping away. I wanted yell, "STOP! Save him from the knowledge of death! Save him from the reality of death! Save him from death!" But if I had done that, it wouldn't have saved him at all, it just would have left him afraid and unable to grow. He had to confront death. And his innocence—maybe this is a bit dramatic, but in a sense, it needed to die a little on this topic in order for him to grow up a little and live a little more wholly without being afraid.

I was telling him the story of the night my mother died. And he asked me, "What did Grandma look like when she died?" And I said, "Well, I took a picture of her after she died, lying in the bed," and I immediately regretted it. "Can I see it?" he asked.

I took the picture because I wanted to remember the sacredness of that moment for my family and for my mother. It was sad and tragic. It was death. But it was sacred. And it didn't feel like the end. It felt like a beginning for Mom and for all of us. "Are you sure it won't be scary?" I asked him. "I'm sure," he said. "I want to see it." And I knew he needed to see it now in order to not be afraid. So, I showed him the photo. He asked me to zoom in on her face. I did. I held my breath. "Is it scary?" I asked. "No, it's not. Now can I see a picture of Grandma breathing?" And so we lay together snuggling in bed flipping back and forth between pictures of my mom when she was alive and the picture of her just after she died. And I felt my son growing in my arms.

Death and growth truly are connected. From the very beginning we risk everything to be here. And the challenges we face, the innocence we lose, and the sacrifices we make to keep the great engine of creation and life turning are what is truly sacred. Amen.