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Lent 5B
Peace, Seattle
March 18, 2018
John 12:20-33

SEED OF NEW LIFE

His name is Nikolai Vavilov and he was the inspiration behind the world's first seed collection aimed at preserving the genetic diversity of plants throughout the world. I first heard about Vavilov's work at Holden Village when I met Seattle documentary filmmaker, John de Graaf, and saw his film GENETIC TIME BOMB.[1]

Vavilov was a pioneer in plant genetics and a man with a mission.
Over a period of three decades, beginning in 1916, he mounted 100 expeditions to collect seeds and tubers from places in the world where few westerners had ever been before—harsh deserts, rugged mountains, thick jungles—in every region of the globe. His goal was simple: to preserve seeds from as many of the world's indigenous plant species as he could get his hands on.

Through the efforts of Vavilov and his colleagues, the seed collection grew to number more than 200,000 separate species, which he used to establish the world's first seed bank—the Institute of Plant Industry in Leningrad [modern day St. Petersburg].

In his work, Vavilov discovered the critical importance of plant genetic diversity and the agricultural practices that would best preserve and extend that legacy.

Arrested by order of Joseph Stalin in 1940 because his views on plant genetics were at odds with a Stalin disciple, Vavilov tragically died of starvation in a Soviet prison in 1943.
Yet, despite the harsh conditions brought on by WW2, the work that he'd begun continued.

During Germany's 900-day blockade of Leningrad, when over a million Russian people lost their lives to starvation and cold, a core of Vavilov's colleagues guarded and preserved his seed bank.
Inspired by his vision, they chose starvation for themselves rather than eating seeds from the collection that was at their fingertips.

Vavilov and his colleagues put their lives on the line, so that a precious and irreplaceable heritage would be preserved. **They were willing to die in order that future generations might live.**

"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."

When Jesus uttered these words it hadn't been long since Lazarus, wrapped in grave cloths and smelling four days dead, stumbled out of his tomb and into the arms of his sisters and friends.[2]

This unprecedented miracle sent Jerusalem's religious establishment into crisis mode. Before too long, they feared, everyone would be following this Jesus, and Rome would send troops to destroy both the Temple and their nation.

When the crowds who'd been at Lazarus' tomb begin telling their story, the authorities' worst fears are confirmed: "Look," the Pharisees exclaim, "the world has gone after him!"

[1] A portion of the film introducing Vavilov can be found here: https://vimeo.com/197234033 Other films by DeGraaf can be found here: https://www.johndegraaf.com/films-1/
[2] See Audrey West's commentary at Working Preacher. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=268

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There can be only one way to deal with Jesus. DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND, the High Priest Caiaphas tells them, THAT IT IS BETTER TO HAVE ONE MAN DIE FOR THE PEOPLE THAN TO HAVE THE WHOLE NATION DESTROYED?

Only days later, Jesus and his disciples enter Jerusalem for the last time to celebrate Passover. Throughout the gospel Jesus has been saying, in so many words,

> MY HOUR HAS NOT YET COME…MY TIME IS NOT YET AT HAND.

But when Philip and Andrew lead a group of Greek pilgrims to Jesus it's as if a switch is flipped, and Jesus reaches for an image from the fields to teach his followers the necessity of what is about to happen:

> THE HOUR HAS COME FOR THE SON OF MAN TO BE GLORIFIED. 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.

A seed of grain only fulfills its purpose when it's buried in the earth, for only then can it germinate, only then can it sprout, only then can it grow to produce new fruit, new seed, a new harvest.

Jesus was a teacher, a prophet, a healer. He had the power to caste out demons, restore crippled bodies, forgive sins—even raise up the dead. But these powers and gifts and attributes would have no enduring power unless he completed the mission God had sent him to fulfill.

THE LIFE HE OFFERED THE WORLD COULD ONLY GROW FROM HIS DEATH.

Have you ever had to die in order to live?

On their journey through the wilderness God's people constantly practiced new ways of trusting, new ways of acting, new ways of practicing their faith.

In one famous example, God had provided manna for his people, but instructed them NOT to gather more than they needed for each day. Coming from a place where, as slaves, they had always lived on the edge, this was not easy to do! Better to lay some aside for tomorrow, put some away as a hedge against a rainy day.

But when they defaulted to this old way of behaving, they found that the extra manna they gathered became wormy and spoiled. How many times over 40 years did they have to live through similar scenarios before it sank in that they had to DIE to their old way of being in the world?

They're not alone, of course. If I could have harvested all the learning and wisdom available to me from my own mistakes and missteps—and done so the first time through—I would have saved myself a lot of grief! But I've seldom managed to do that.

As a result the same life curriculum keeps coming back into my life—that ever happen to you? We'll do just about anything to cling to our ways of doing things—anything that is except dying to them.

What must I—what must we—die to in order to truly live?
The question is just as germane to families, congregations, nations, as it is to individuals.

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When students around the country walked out of class last Wednesday one month after the shooting in Parkland, Florida, they gave a clear message to elected leaders about what really needs to die—and it's not more children, it's our national obsession with unrestricted access to weapons—including military grade weapons.

Raising the minimum age for purchasing certain weapons will likely save lives. But that's really a technical fix. And technical fixes only get you so far. What we need are deeper and more lasting changes in how we in this society depend on violent means for solving problems—and getting THERE will require a complete rearrangement of our thinking—the Bible calls it repentance— a change of mind and heart, an about face—not just little tweaks to the system here or there.

Anything less than systemic change will not be enough. But real change only comes on the heels of letting go. Which brings us back to question posed by today's gospel: **What must die in order for us to truly live?**

Imagine the mental process those Soviet seed bank scientists bank had to go through! Surely it occurred to them that the seed bank they were guarding could be sacrificed to save their own lives.

Surely they knew that if they wanted to, they could take those seeds, germinate them so they'd sprout, and then eat them. It wouldn't be enough to save the city's 2 million residents, but it might be enough to allow them to survive!

But they put the idea out of their minds, they let it die, for the sake of a greater good—a good whose dimensions they could not even fully grasp.

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.

The promise that God leaves with us today is not that we shall never die. The promise is that through Christ's death and resurrection, death has become the seedbed for new life.

God has sown the seed of Jesus Christ into our lives, and with the waters of baptism has nourished that seed and it is sprouting and growing. We are God's field, which will produce a harvest for the world. May our lives be good soil for God's promises. Amen.