

March 18, 2018 – Journey worship

TEXT: John 12:20–28

TITLE: Pulling Nails

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

My in-laws have a summer house in Vermont that we visit just about every year. It's a big Adirondack lodge on a sloping hillside surrounded by trees. It's not heated, so family members only go there in the summer. It's almost 100 years old, so it is in need of pretty constant repair. This means our summer vacations are often working holidays. One summer several years ago, it became clear that one of the bathrooms needed attention. Below the rafters, two holes in the wallboard were visible where mice had chewed through and made nests between the paneling and the stud walls. More than likely they had been there for quite some time, since a special, woodsy aroma of mouse droppings had begun to fill the room with its fragrant bouquet. That summer, we went to the hardware store and bought some tools and masks so we could remove the dusty, pungent wallboard as well as chase out the illegal occupants nesting behind the bathroom walls. More about this later...

Today's gospel lesson from John takes place in the city of Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus' triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and because of that miracle and others, crowds of people were anxious to meet this young rabbi from Nazareth. Both Jews and non-Jewish Gentiles were seeking out Jesus, as evidenced by the opening verses of our passage—how some Greeks (non-Jews) tracked down Philip, one of the twelve disciples, and said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went to Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, and they told Jesus about this request for an introduction. Jesus responded with a metaphor about seeds bearing fruit—which as metaphors go could be heard in a superficial, upbeat way: Behold! The gospel good news has gone forth like seeds scattered on a field, reaching people far and wide with words of hope and bearing harvests of fruit in changed hearts and minds.

But in actuality, Jesus' metaphor was much more intense than that and slightly unsettling. He said this: *Truly I tell you, unless a seed, a grain of wheat, falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a solitary seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.* Every farmer and gardener knew the truth in Jesus' words. Grains of wheat cannot stay just as they are—hard, singular kernels—if they hope to bear fruit. They must die to what they are if they are to become something more, according to the will of God. Jesus' metaphor is aimed right at us during this season of Lent. We too are like seeds, and we must die to our self-absorption, die to our isolation, because by loving ourselves above all else means we paradoxically end up losing ourselves, losing our ability to bear fruit in this world. It is in letting go, in giving away, that we gain much more. It is in dying to the world's definitions of power and prosperity that we discover what it means to love and bear fruit and live as people of the kingdom of God.

Back to the Vermont cabin. Tools were gathered up and work commenced on repairing the rodent-damaged bathroom wall. The fiberboard paneling had been there for literally

decades, so Lord only knew what was living behind it. But worst of all was the challenge about how to remove the outer wall. To cut the fiber-board would be messy and tedious. Ripping it off would be an even worse choice. It soon became clear that the only way to get the paneling off was to pull out all the nails that held it in place—rows of nails up the supporting studs, nails along the crossbeams, under the molding, dozens and dozens of nails. Each nail had to be isolated, gripped by a hammer claw, pried loose from the wall, and then tossed into a nearby trash can before you could move on to the next nail—and the next one, over and over again. So that’s what we did.

There is something cathartic about pulling nails. It means you are willing to remove something of the past in order to put in place something new for the future. In the process you will see clearly all the bent nails, all the sins and shortcomings of past efforts. But you are motivated by the desire for a fresh start. And yes, we did find mice nests behind the walls that had to be gathered up and cleaned out. Yes, it was stinky and messy and unpleasant. But in the end, the new wall, attached with new nails, meant a fresh start. To pull out all those nails was the right thing to do and the right way to get the job done.

Hold that thought as we consider what else Jesus had to say when Andrew and Philip brought Greek guests to him on that day long ago. Jesus had just had his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. People from everywhere were flocking to him, anxious to learn from him and see if he was a true prophet, perhaps even the Messiah. At the precise moment where we might have expected him to earn their devotion with a prosperity gospel message—“Follow me and all your troubles will be over and all your wounds will be made whole”—Jesus offered a quite different message: *Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit.* Then the very next words he spoke were even more surprising. He publicly prayed and shared words of vulnerability: *Now my soul is troubled.*

Now my soul is troubled. When have you said that in your own life? When have you felt anxious deep down inside? When have you been worried about a relationship that has become damaged or about a conflict that will have to be dealt with? When have you awoken at night and immediately your mind went to something that is troubling you and disturbing your sleep? When have you also prayed, “God, now my soul is troubled”?

And to connect this question with the Vermont story I’ve been sharing: Ask yourself: When has your outer façade been disrupted by unwanted pests—sins, fears, and anxieties that have taken up residence within you? When have you reached a point in your life when you knew the only way forward was to take down the walls, reveal what was going on beneath the surface to someone else—a friend, pastor, counselor, spouse or partner, co-worker—even though what was hidden behind that wall may well be stinky and messy, awkward and hard to clean out?

“Now my soul is troubled” is spoken when we don’t feel loved, when we don’t know how bills will be paid, when we’re not happy about our fragile bodies and failing health. “Now my soul is troubled” is also spoken when we worry about our nation; when we worry

about the way people around us are treated—especially people we love, especially people whose looks or skin or gender or sexual identity make them targets for injustice; when we worry about domestic violence and addiction and crumbling bridges and unsafe water and the entire lexicon of human suffering that is lifted up in countless prayers spoken every single day.

What are we to do as people of faith when we find ourselves praying the same words as Jesus saying “Now my soul is troubled”? First, we are to look to the cross. The cross, as a symbol and a reality, reminds us of the light and shadows, the love and hate that are the unavoidable reality of life on earth. It is like the wisdom that comes from singing every Good Friday the old spiritual “Were You There?” as each verse names the paradox of God becoming flesh yet dying on a tree, of the Lord of life being laid in a borrowed tomb. Jesus prayed “Now my soul is troubled” just as we pray those words. Jesus took on suffering, even our suffering, and yet he also said “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.*” We look to the cross and to the one on the cross, finding strength in the tough truth that life includes darkness and light, death and life, which the Savior to whom we pray knows full well.

Second, we look beyond the cross to the promise of resurrection, the Easter good news. The one lifted on the cross is also the one exalted by resurrection. The man-made instrument of death is now empty, and as such, a reminder of a heaven-blessed promise of new life. We still have to go through Good Friday to reach Easter. Only the seed that dies will bear fruit. But the entire equation is not made up of two equal parts—this much pain equals this much glory. No, as the apostle Paul has said, *This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure* (2 Cor 4:17). The reason we pray, the reason we have the strength to keep on keepin’ on, is because the cross never has the final word. We look to Golgotha, we sing “Were you there?”, but then we pause and transition to another truth both deeper and higher that always begins with the phrase, “But on the third day, he arose.”

Lastly, in addition to looking at the cross and clinging to the resurrection promises of our faith, what else can we do right now as we pray “Now my soul is troubled”? One positive response is to start pulling nails. Think about it. Between the darkness of Jesus’ crucifixion and the rising of the sun (son) on Easter morn, there was a moment when Jesus’ body had to be removed from the cross. They had to pull out the nails that kept him there on that instrument of death. They had to remove the things of a sinful past so that a blessed future might be born.

If you’re not sure how to bring healing in your life, or how to make sense of the wilderness moments in your life in general, think about pulling some nails—pulling out the nails that are covering up what in your own life needs to come into the light at last. At the same time, think about pulling out nails that are inflicting pains on others: Nails of violence still being hammered into victims today. Nails of aggression, of capital punishment, of pay inequity, of prejudice. Nails of isolation, of believing that everyone has forgotten you and no one cares any more. Pull out the small nails especially designed to hurt children; pull out large nails designed to oppress large groups through

words and deeds and unjust laws. Without pulling some nails on Good Friday, there will be no body in the tomb and no resurrection on Easter. What was true back then is still true today.

On that day, Jesus prayed “*Now my soul is troubled. What should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Abba, Lord, glorify your name.*” Christ’s prayer is designed to be our prayer. There is much that is troubling, much to be repaired, and a whole lot of nails to be pulled. But we are never alone in this work. And we know how the repair job finishes—because on the third day... Thanks be to God.