

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

March 22, 2015; the 5th Sunday in Lent

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-13; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33.

Preparing the Soil, Seeing the Growth

Some Greeks, gentiles, came and said, “[W]e wish to see Jesus.”

Just who did they want to see?

Were they wondering, who Jesus might be...did they know about what he had been saying and doing...proclaiming that God’s reign had come near...and healing people...there were even rumors that he had brought some back from death.

When Jesus heard that people were asking to see him, he responds with these words: “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....”

Jesus is all about transformation...transformation for himself and for all who follow him.

Jesus is about new life...new life for himself and all who follow him.

When do we see Jesus?

When do we see Jesus, the Christ of God?

Jesus goes on to say that those who want to see him, those who want to know him, must follow him...must follow him down this path that leads from death to life...down this path that leads from the **planting of one seed** to fruitful growth beyond our wildest dreams.

Jesus did not live, and work, die and rise, so that our lives would be perfect or easy...when you listen to some preachers, those who

preach what is known as the “prosperity gospel,” you might think that being a Christian means just that...that Jesus did all that for us so that we can be wealthy and successful, immune to suffering and challenges.

That, my friends, is serious misinterpretation of the Christian faith...

it is in fact an impoverishment of the great promises that God has made to us in and through Christ.

I would go so far as to say the “prosperity gospel” is abusive because those who are not successful by the world’s standards or going through a time of pain, are told that they must be doing something wrong, or God would bless them...you see where this prosperity gospel logic leads...no where good.

No, Jesus stands before us offering himself and the truth...in all nakedness and vulnerability...and invites us to join him in God’s great prayer for our world.

In following Jesus, we become God’s prayer for the world.
We become the answer to God’s prayer.

We become the soil where God’s seed of grace is planted.

We can be the good soil that provides a warm and loving environment for seeds of grace to germinate and grow.

Lent has been providing us such space to prepare the soil of our hearts to receive and nurture the special seed of grace that God plants in each of us.

Art in support of liturgy...the altar hanging on the Holy Table...has been providing us an image of this seed sprouting and growing and changing as we have been preparing for Easter.

And just as in our lives, when we open ourselves to God’s action and welcome and nurture that which God creates in us, we see growth, we see the fruits, we see the “much fruit” of which Jesus spoke.

There is a certain synergy which occurs, when we stop and listen, make space, and have patience.

We see this synergy in the vision of, planning for, and creation of our new Rain Garden.

Today we will bless and dedicate our Rain Garden, which is our gift to God and God's creation in our corner of the world.

As a community, we took our time, had patience, prepared the soil, if you will, for the creation of the Rain Garden.

Initial steps, over a year ago, to get funding from outside ourselves to pay for the Garden did not pan out, but that was ok, it gave us more time to prepare and plan...many felt a call to help with the planning, and funding, and execution that resulted in the creation of the Rain Garden.

We experienced this synergy when we as a church came together to finance and install our new HVAC system...we all supported this by being willing to worship in the parish hall and staying together through the installation period.

Sometimes church attendance falls off, goes way down, when people cannot worship in their church, usual worship space, but that was not our experience...we stayed together and we grew during that time.

Every challenge in life and in our communal life as a church gives us a chance to consider what is really important, that, as our opening prayer for today, today's collect, states, that "our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found."

We want to be good stewards of this church for this time and for generations to come, as were those who built this church and this community from our founding in 1902.

They provided for us.

We want to follow their example of sacrificial giving as they were following, as are we, the call of Christ to follow and to serve.

Recently, we did a discernment process and feasibility study to determine how to structure, and time, a campaign for reinvestment of the 350,000 dollars used for the new heating and air system and raise money for additional capital improvements.

As I mentioned in the weekly email, our e-Messenger, I want to share the results of that study with you today and also thank you for participating in the feasibility study.

We had an excellent rate of return on our survey, much higher than usual, which indicates what the surveys told us: that we are doing well; we have great enthusiasm for this church and the ministry that we share; we are informed about what is happening and have a good sense of areas that need on-going attention, for improvement.

On Sunday April 12th, I and the others from the steering committee will give you details and answer questions, for today, I want to give you the essential information and put this process in the context of our faith, as informed by today's readings, and the season of Lent.

This feasibility study will help us prepare the soil for God's seeds of grace as they relate to the future of this church, our life together in community.

The town meetings, the discernment thus far, and the feasibility study all help us know how to move forward so as to pay back the money used for the HVAC and address remaining capital improvement needs.

Our faith makes sense, and we can see its importance best, in the specifics of our lives and our life as a church.

The feasibility study showed that we are not yet ready to launch into the part of a campaign which would result in pledging to the campaign.

We need to take more time to prepare the soil.

We need to take more time to prepare for the next phase of a campaign, and at this point we are not ready to say when that next phase will

begin, it might be a year from now, it might be five years from now.

Right now we need to focus on preparing the soil, as we have been doing since I came to be your priest.

After ten years of clergy transitions and difficult times, our church is doing extremely well, but we need to continue our healing process by having consistent, transparent, faithful and faith-focused leadership and church member participation.

The biggest concerns and areas named as needing improvement are related to finances, stewardship, and welcoming newcomers and new members.

These are the areas, the soil, that we will cultivate in the coming months and years.

God is for us.

God wants us to be the church of God's dreams here at the corner of Monument and Staples Mill.

And as Jesus told those who wanted to see him, being the people of God involves transformation, and transformation takes time.

It can even look like death sometimes, but that seed is still there, dormite, waiting, for the right conditions, the right environment to grow.

And we will work on this not because we need to make sure this church can buy its next HVAC, though that would be nice,
but because God calls us to be light in a world...God calls us to be here for those who need us, and for each other, because we need each other.

Over the years, this church has had a number of seeds planted that did not seem to bring about growth, but I posit that those seeds are still there, along with new ones, and that like the Christ, they may seem to die where they were planted, **but they will rise**...the seeds planted by God **will grow**...in the soil of our hearts, and minds, and church...when prepared...properly, thoroughly prepared, as much as possible through

our prayerful effort, with God's help.

We are already seeing it, and with maturity and patience, we will seek to follow the lead of God **and not get ahead of the grace.**

Today we celebrate those seeds of grace planted and now visible in the creation of the Rain Garden.

Today we celebrate those seeds of grace planted and now visible in the newcomers and new members of our church here now.

Today we have much to celebrate.

And the greatest thing that we have to celebrate this day and everyday, is God's love for us...known in many ways, through creation, in the eyes of friends and those who love us...through Jesus the Christ, who like a seed planted, seemed to die but instead was transformed so as to draw all people to God.

The life of faith, and the life of a faith community is one of dying and rising, of being transformed more and more into the people, and church, God is creating us to be.

And so we pray to God, who gives everything to draw us close:

Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise;

that, among the swift and varied changes of the world,

our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found. Amen.