

“Salsa and Salvation”

Matthew 10:39; John 12:24

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A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2011, I. Peden

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Rob Bell begins his dvd called *Tomato* in this way: “My wife makes the best salsa in the world. She uses Roma tomatoes and then she adds onion and some jalapeno pepper, and, of course, some cilantro. It all gets thrown into a blender and then I sit in front of this bowl of food from the heavens, and I take a tortilla chip, and for a few moments all is right with the world. Now these tomatoes were originally alive; they were connected to the vine which has its roots in the soil. They grew from the earth. The same is true of the onions, peppers, and cilantro. They were once all receiving nutrients from the earth, but then they were harvested, thrown on a truck, brought to the farmer’s market, and eventually ended up in our kitchen. When they were harvested they were severed from the vine, they were pulled from the soil, they were disconnected from their life source, and they were brought to us so that we could eat them. And if we don’t eat, we don’t live.”

“This food ...this dead food ...gives us life,” Bell continues. “The more recently food has been living the more life it gives us. Fresh food is better for us. This actually explains the nutritional deficiencies of a ‘Twinkie’ – it can’t give life because it was never really living. There is this principle that the death of this one thing gives us life: our survival, our sustenance, our life is dependent upon the death of another living thing.”

Bell adds: “This rhythm of death giving way to life is built into the very fabric of the created order. Now back to the tomatoes ...If we want more tomatoes, new tomatoes, something to make more salsa, we are going to have to plant the tomato seeds. What is planting? It is taking seed and placing it in the ground and burying it. Generally, we bury things that are dead. And then in some mysterious way a new tomato plant will arise out of the earth because death is the engine of life.”

Bell then applies his “salsa parable” to our Christian faith by asking, “So when the Bible tells the story of God bringing new life to the world, how does the story go? It’s about Jesus who dies and rises again. It’s about death bringing about new life: his death on a cross ...his

resurrection ...in some ways it's how the world has always worked. Jesus doesn't just enter into this process with his own flesh and blood, but then he invites people to take up their cross."

In Matthew 10:39 Jesus says, "Unless you lose your life for my sake, you will never find it." He says in John 12:24, "Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it can't produce new life." Jesus teaches us how to die so that we can really live. Jesus invites parts of us to die – parts that hold us back from living – like the part of us that constantly tries to make ourselves look good, or the part of us that always has to be right, or the part of us that always has to be better than others, or the part of us that always tries to look like we have it together.

Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces much fruit." Jesus' metaphor of the seed that "dies" in order to produce fruit is a good metaphor because it would have been understood by most all of Jesus' audience. The metaphor worked for them, and it does for us, too. We know the image he is using. The seed dies and thereby will produce abundant fruit.

What Jesus is teaching with the use of the metaphor is that we must undergo a process of transformation ...a change from death to life. Admittedly, we resist the process. It is hard to give up our agendas, our objectives, our aspirations, our interests—our *ego*. Yet this is what we have been called to: the new life of Christ in us. That is a marvelous exchange! In our dying, Christ is alive within us. In our brokenness Christ is seen clearly. The way to fullness is brokenness; the way to life is by death.

Two points seem unmistakably clear to me here: the first is that this is hard; the second is that this is glorious. We don't need to miss either of these. If we only see the hard part, we will miss the power and the freedom. If we only see the glorious part, we will minimize the sacrifice. The seed must die. "Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies ...". It is hard to die. It is hard to follow Jesus on the road that leads to the cross. It is hard to take the role of a servant in a world of power.

The way to life by death is hard, but it is also glorious. Here's the glory: Yes, the seed must die, but "if it dies it bears much fruit." The death is not in vain. It is significant. It bears fruit. To Jesus, glory is in being lifted up and nailed to a cross to save humankind. To Jesus' disciples, glory is being lifted up on thrones to lord it over the Gentiles. To Jesus, glory is about others. For the disciples, it is about themselves.

“Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it cannot bear any fruit.” Jesus refers here to his own impending death and resurrection. Jesus makes a promise. His death will result in life; not only for his crucified body, but for all humankind. I hope we all understand the truth Jesus is sharing: our hope for life is in his death, burial, and resurrection. To receive God’s free gift of eternal life, we must die to our own efforts to earn or control our destiny, and put ourselves totally in Jesus’ hands.

When Jesus spoke about a seed falling into the ground and dying, he was turning his disciples’ worldview upside down. And Jesus could be doing that to us today ...now in this very place ...Jesus could be turning our worldview upside down. Our American worldview is so much about ascent ...climbing up to high, successful places of power and prestige; Jesus’ worldview is about descent, climbing down off our high horses to lowly, humble places of self-sacrifice and selflessness. Our worldview is about gaining and hoarding wealth; Jesus’ worldview is about losing our lives in serving and sharing our riches with others.

In another place in the gospels Jesus says, “If you want to be my disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” Denying ourselves is dying to self. What we allow to die in our lives ...what we lay down for Christ like fear, despair, and sin will result in something transformed like faith, hope, and forgiveness ...and that is the glory. Something new and glorious is raised up in its place. “If anyone is in Christ,” Paul wrote, “old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new.” We can never out-sacrifice Christ’s resurrection generosity. And the glory of new life in Christ compensates for the hardness of dying to self. In fact, the glory turns the hardness of it into the most significant life imaginable.

Rob Bell says “death is the engine of life” and he says he is talking about salvation. “Jesus saves,” he says. We know that this salvation is God’s free gift ...unearned, undeserved ...the demonstration of God’s sheer grace. Bell reminds us that we have become so easily deceived that we are loved because we are moral enough, spiritual enough, right enough ... but the essence of Jesus’ message is that we aren’t saved, accepted and loved because of how spiritual, moral or right we are. Rather, we are saved in our death. Like a tomato plant, our new life can only flourish when salsa is made ...when we allow the used up part of us to die ...when the tomato seeds – what remains of the tomato after making the salsa – fall to the ground and die.

Bell says: “We’re invited to trust Jesus because we’ve been told we can never do it alone. But some people refuse to die; they relentlessly cling to their *egos* and false selves and keep propping up that particular version of themselves that they think is desirable, and trust in their own efforts to accomplish this somehow, someday. Is this you holding on to your life so tightly that you are actually losing it?”

Death is the engine of life. “Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit,” Jesus said. In a supreme act of faith, a farmer opens his hands and drops his seed into the earth. It lies there dead and buried, and he waits throughout the long winter for some sign that there will be a crop in the spring. Scientists cannot explain this mystery. A dead seed lies buried in the soil for weeks. And then, defying all logic, it comes alive. A single seed like a grain of wheat produces a stalk with multiple seeds that have within them the potential of vast wheat fields that can feed the whole world.

Imagine what would happen if the farmer ate all of his seed, or stored all of it in his barn? There are people who are desperately trying to hold onto their lives. Some of us may be hoarding our lives that way. We are holding on to our dreams and visions, refusing to let go. We are holding onto relationships the same way. We are stashing away our money as security against future financial disaster. We are fighting to keep our position and reputation. We want to control everything. The problem with this picture is that it is not about living ...it may be about existing but it is hardly the abundant life that Jesus said he had come to bring.

Jesus wanted his disciples like you and me to understand that the way to respond to God’s gracious, free gift of salvation is the way of death. So may we die to our own efforts to control our lives, and put ourselves totally in Jesus’ hands. May we remember that if we die to self ...if we die with Christ ...we will also be raised to new life in Christ ...that death is the engine of life. And may we recall whenever we eat a bowl of salsa that all *is* right with the world because Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection is the supreme hope of eternal life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.