

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 5th Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2015

**He Said It Three Times:
A Story About a Grain of Wheat**

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John 12:20-33

How many times does someone have to tell you something before you understand it or believe it?

It has been proven that most people need to be told something three times. Professional speakers are trained to tell their audience what they are going to say, then say it, and then tell the audience what they said. They tell the audience the same thing in one way or another three times.

Junk mailers will also tell you that it takes at least three mailings to get most people to respond to whatever it is that they are selling or offering.

Those of you who were teachers understand that rule of threes I am sure. To make a child remember something, to really learn it, you need to teach it at least three times.

Certainly parents know that. "Billy, don't do that or I will send you to your room." Of course Billy tests Mom, does it again, and gets the same warning. "I told you not to do that. If you do it again, I'll send you to your room." Then he does whatever it was a third time and off to his room he goes. Then he learns --- not before.

Three seems to be the number of times that most people need to experience something before they get it through their thick skulls.

There is an old joke about a newly married couple who go horseback riding. The bride's horse bucks and throws her off. The man walks up to the horse, strikes it across the nose with his riding crop, and says, "That's one."

He helps his wife to remount and they ride off. They go to jump a low fence and her horse stops short and tosses her over its head. The man again strikes the horse with his crop and says, "That's two."

He trades horses with his wife and takes her horse. A short while later a snake slithers across the trail, startles the horse, and it runs under a low hanging tree branch

knocking the man off. He walks up to the horse, pulls out a gun, and shoots it saying, "That's three."

His wife screams at him telling him that his actions were cruel and uncalled for. He turns to face her and quietly says, "That's one."

Now what does all of this have to do with our scripture reading from John. Think about the reading. Did you notice that twice something is said for the third time in the New Testament?

Jesus calls out, "*Father, glorify your name*" and the voice of God is heard saying "*I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.*" God is confirming for the third time that Jesus is his son.

The audience who heard this is a group of Greeks who wanted to talk to Jesus. Philip and Andrew brought them to see Jesus. Philip and Andrew had Greek names and presumably spoke Greek so it was logical for them to bring the Greek visitors to Jesus and the Greeks heard the voice of God for the third time in the New Testament confirming that Jesus was God's son.

The first time was when Jesus was baptized, the dove descended upon him, and God spoke saying, "*You are my Son, whom I love; and with you I am well pleased.*"

The second time was when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain top and Peter, James and John hear God say to them, "*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.*"

Three times God affirmed who Jesus was. Some people understood and believed but not everyone. Had everyone been present on all three occasions virtually all of them would have believed but few people heard the words of God more than once.

Something else is said in scripture three times, something which probably puzzled the disciples. In today's scripture reading Jesus says, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" That is a reference back to something said earlier in the New Testament three times.

Jesus told his mother during the wedding in Cana where he turned water into wine, "*My hour has not yet come.*" (John 2:4). Then in Jerusalem when he was teaching, the authorities tried to arrest him. They failed "*because his hour had not yet come.*" (John 8:20). Then when he was teaching in the temple courts, "*no one seized him, because his hour had not yet come.*" (John 7:30).

Now Jesus abruptly says *“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* (John 12:23).

Three times the hour had not yet come. Three times Jesus is affirmed as God’s Son, but now the hour had come. Few people were at these various times and locations all three times these affirmations were made so relatively few people believed.

If people had been present all three times, things might have been different. Quoting Walter Bruggemann, et al,¹ *“The ‘hour’ arrives because opposition to Jesus reaches its inevitable outcome: The officials will seek his death ... Here the world seeks after Jesus, but the world is fickle, seeking tomorrow after another who might do more astonishing signs or offer more soothing advice. The world is finally not able to believe that Jesus is from God and follow after him. The popularity of Jesus in this passage quickly fades and turns into hostility that confronts Pilate and demands Jesus’ crucifixion. The world is a thoroughly unreliable place; neither its hostility nor its adoration can be trusted.”*

So like the man who shoots his horse, they demand that Jesus be crucified.

They didn’t hear God acknowledge Jesus as his son three times. Unlike the professional speaker’s audience and unlike children who are told something three times, they didn’t understand and they didn’t believe.

Jesus talks in our scripture reading about the need for a grain of wheat to die before it can grow and produce many seeds. The grain of wheat has only one chance, not three. The grain of wheat must be buried, germinate, and sprout. For it to do what it is meant to do, it has to wait in the soil until its hour has come. Then it will break open and new life will come forth. A wheat stock will grow and produce much grain but, if you dig to find the seed, you won’t find it. It sacrifices itself to provide the world with more wheat.

Jesus’ efforts on earth, the many things he said, even those things which were said or done three or more times, could only reach a relative few.

He had to wait until his hour had come. Like the grain of wheat, he had to die and be buried and be resurrected to bring forth an abundant harvest of future believers. He had to die for the sins of the world.

Barbara Brown Taylor² said, *“When Jesus died, his power was made manifest. By absorbing into himself the worst that the world could do to a child of God and by*

refusing to do any of it back, he made sure it was put to death with him. By suffering every kind of hurt and shame without ever once letting them deflect him from his purpose, he broke their hold on humankind. In him sin met its match. He showed us what is possible. These are just some of the fruits of Christ's death, things that could never have happened if he had not been willing to fall to the ground.

“So here we sit, the local field of wheat who owe our lives to him. If he had not died, we would not be here. Because he did, we are. He has spoken to us about the way of life and the way of death, letting us know that these are the only two choices and that none of us may abstain. When the hour comes, each of us has a grain of wheat with which to cast our votes. It is the grain of our lives, and all of creation is holding its breath to see what we will do with it.”

Amen.

1. Texts for Preaching, Year B, Walter Bruggemann, et al, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993
2. God in Pain, Barbara Brown Taylor, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1998.