

“Acorn to Oak”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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John 12:20-33

If you can handle a chainsaw, and you know what you’re doing, you can cut down an oak tree with a fair enough chance of not getting yourself killed or damaging valuable property. Then there’s the stump, which if you’re determined enough, can be persuaded from the ground with plenty of digging and chopping, and maybe a little cussing, aided by a strong tug from a large truck tied to the stump with some heavy chain.

Or you could do it my Granddaddy Burton’s way: with a half-stick of dynamite on a short fuse tucked underneath the stump. Once lit, run like there’s no tomorrow, or there won’t be, at least not for you. Since stable explosives can be hard to come by in our post 9/11 world Granddaddy Burton’s method isn’t really an option for us anymore, which leaves us with the hard way.

So after you’ve felled that oak tree, what you’ll want to do is find yourself a few friends who owe you a big favor. Once you get that stump out of the ground, what you’re going to have is a crater with plenty of roots, and if you dig down deep enough into that hole, you know what you’re never going to find? The acorn that made the oak tree you just cut down.

It’s long gone. The acorn, after having fallen from another oak tree, possibly before you were born, sat around on the forest floor and eventually, that acorn – having somehow avoided being eaten by hungry squirrels or collected by curious children or succumbing to one of the many depredations that the average acorn may suffer – that acorn will gradually get buried by debris until it’s entirely immersed in the soil.

And then, if the conditions are right, that little nut will start germinating, which is a polite way of saying that the acorn will crack open and begin a process not unlike turning itself inside out. A small tendril will shoot forth, headed toward the surface, while another will shoot downward to form a root system. How that top tendril knows which way is the sun, I have no idea, but if everything goes right, that tendril will someday shoot above the surface as a seedling and grow into a sapling, then a small tree, and finally a mighty oak, before someday, someone, encouraged by a deranged preacher, grabs a chainsaw on a quest to find the acorn that started it all, which isn't there anymore.

It doesn't take a single day in biology class to know that this is how oak trees work, along with most of the other plants in the world. The acorn transforms into something else completely different from its original self, namely a tree that would exceed the wildest imagination of someone unaware of the intimate connection between the acorn nut and the oak tree. Who would ever guess that something so small and fragile could become something so enormous and strong? Even for those who know, it remains a wonder that the potential for such a great thing could be found within the tiniest, most unpromising of packages.

Perhaps most shocking of all is how matter-of-factly all this happens. The acorn falls, endures, gets buried, and then sacrifices itself – presumably with no knowledge of how all this is going to turnout – allowing new life to spring forth that will repeat the process continuously.

This is the life of Christian discipleship, in a nutshell. Like all people, we too have fallen. There is much that threatens to devour us or to carry us away as a curiosity, only to be dumped later on a whim. But many of us, perhaps most, find a way to endure long enough to get buried in conditions that encourage us to burst open and allow our true potential to spring forth.

Being buried and bursting open can prove uncomfortable, but that gradual process of transformation is more than worth it.

Much like the acorn, the more we develop as Christians, the less there remains of our original selves. There can be a tremendous sense of loss, as we become transformed from who we once were into who God wants us to be. The fear and grief we may feel about this change can be very similar to the fear and grief we feel about death, because changing from an ordinary acorn into a sturdy Christian oak usually involves a little series of deaths.

It was William Shakespeare, I believe, who once wrote “A coward dies a thousand deaths,” and there may be some wisdom to that. However, I believe it is even more true that a Christian dies a thousand deaths, and far from being cowardly, there’s a noble courage in it, as we submit to that gradual surrender of self, so that through God’s grace we might be transformed into a renewed self that rises up to the heavens like the oak from the acorn.

Of course, not all acorns are the same. We may seem similar in our outward appearance, and we certainly share a purpose and a potential that overall is veritably identical, but each of us is unique, and therefore, each of us has our own little separate set of deaths to die before the acorn finally disappears into the oak. Some of these deaths we greatly desire and experience as a liberation, a release; but some of them scare us, and rightly so, largely because they come to us unexpectedly.

You see, for better or worse, many of us have been reared with the false idea that the path of Christian discipleship is kind of like elective cosmetic surgery. A nip here, and a tuck there, and everything looks better, and you feel better about yourself, but for the most part, you end up the same person you always were, just more attractive in certain places.

But becoming and being Christian is nothing of the sort. It's an all-in proposition, to borrow a phrase from poker. I repeat the words of Jesus from the Gospel of John: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there my servant will be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." [12:25-26]

Now I don't think that Jesus wants us to hate our lives by loathing every minute as a misery. Instead, Jesus wants us to be clear that to attain the everlasting life we so desperately desire means following him, and that following him means that we must discard any part of our life that gets in the way of that.

What deaths do you need to die, little acorn? Where does your shell need to crack, so that the tender shoot might blossom forth? The specific answers to those questions are as innumerable as the souls that have walked this Earth, but generally those specific answers fall into a few general categories.

For instance, most of us work very hard to achieve independence and take pride in that accomplishment, which to a certain extent is laudable. Unfortunately, that drive toward independence can lead us to the conclusion that we are self-sufficient, and that attitude can make us think that when it comes to community, we can take it or leave it, despite the fact that community is a natural facet of who we are and a necessity for a wholesome life.

Community is really just a network of relationships that, when healthy, generate a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. And if the value we place on individual independence disrupts our relationships within a human community, where we are able to engage other people on roughly equal terms, then we can be sure that the attitude of self-sufficiency will also impede our relationship with God, whom none of us engages on anything like equal terms. The high

value we place on our independence has ironically made us independent of some very important Christian values.

The rugged individualist, so celebrated by our culture, has many redeemable characteristics. However, what is lacking from that way of life is the humility necessary to acknowledge our dependence upon God alone. For many of us, pride in our own supposed self-sufficiency is where our nut has to crack. It is a death we need to die, so that we can be transformed from an ordinary acorn into a Christian oak.

This is one of many examples of how we need to die in order to live. Yet if we allow those deaths to happen, and if the conditions are right to nourish us in the growth that follows, then we may achieve a potential far beyond what we or anyone else might have ever anticipated. In fact, our future may find us soaring high, bearing fruit in the form of seeds called acorns that may someday sprout a forest of Christian oaks, long after we're gone. Amen.