

Sermon for March 18, 2018 (Lent5B) “Fall to the Ground”
(Based on *Jeremiah 31:31-34* and *John 12:20-33*)

They are the most beautiful seeds I had ever seen. Of all the hundreds of seeds in all the hundreds of seed packets-- the black-speckled deep purple of the runner beans, the wild curls of calendula, the tiny whisk-brooms of bachelor's button, the hard-shelled brown pearls of mustard seed, this packet was even more wonderful—wonderful, in part, because the seeds were almost forgotten, rescued and propagated from ancient stock.

I would never have known about them if it weren't for Carl Barnes, an Oklahoma farmer with Cherokee heritage. Most people have only ever tasted two or three kinds of corn, but the old seed catalogues featured over three hundred kinds of sweet corn alone, not to mention the other kinds. Over the course of his life, Carl Barnes touched and tended hundreds, using seeds saved and passed down, seeds that couldn't be bought but only earned through friendship and good will.

He started growing corn to reconnect with his heritage. He knew that many Native tribes, using traditional plant-breeding techniques, had preserved their own unique seed stock in their ancestral lands, but many of those seeds had been lost, like the elders and children who fell to the earth as they were driven from their lands and forcibly marched to “Indian Territory.” Indian Territory-- that was the land that was carved up, smaller and smaller, through the late 1800s, so that the last remaining Native-owned lands could be marketed and handed out to non-Native settlers. The last remaining section was renamed Oklahoma in 1907, so that the very idea of a Territory for Indians literally vanished from the maps. Remember that, next time you start singing along with “Oklahoma,” the musical.

Carl Barnes started seeking out other Native people who had held on to traditions and memories, asking what the old crops were like, how they were used and how they were grown. And, as they talked, it was like a furrow opened up in the dark soil of his own life. His sorrow at the loss of his own history and culture was met by another's pain, and understanding was sown, and seeds of healing began to grow. Sometimes, a story would lead to actual seeds, rare survivors, handed down in families. Those seeds were given as gifts, signs of trust—trust that this quiet, gentle man would let them fall to the earth, water them and watch them, so they could grow again. Mr. Barnes knew that some corn could be ground into delicious flour, and

some could make a fine meal of polenta or grits. Some corn developed shiny, hard-shelled kernels that could either be ground into starchy cornmeal or exploded into white fluffy clouds in a hot pan with oil or butter. Others could be nixtamalized, an ancient method of preparation common throughout the Americas, in which dried kernels were soaked in water with lye or lime, then ground into masa for corn tortillas, tamales, and more.

Mr. Barnes planted out all kinds of corn and chose the best of each harvest to save seeds, each generation bearing the promise of something a little different, maybe better-- better popcorn, a sweeter sweetcorn, a more flavorful masa. But what he loved the best was color: crimson and gold, dusky blues and rich browns, even colors you'd never expect from corn: lavender, pale pink, grass green. And he kept planting, year after year, generation after generation, until he knew he had a treasure, a kind of corn that would reliably produce the widest range of color possible. And then, near the end of his life, he taught a younger farmer, Greg Schoen, how to breed corn, and gave him all the varieties he had, on the condition that he would keep growing, and keep sharing them. He could have hoarded them, claimed exclusive rights, and secured a patent and full copyright protection. And the seed, rare and expensive, would have stayed rare. But instead, he spread the seeds and the word, talking to seed-savers and seed-sharers everywhere he went. And his student, Greg Schoen, did the same, handing out seeds of one of Barnes' triumphs: a cross of Pawnee miniature popcorn with an Osage red flour corn and another called "Greyhorse," that produced a cob full of dazzling transparent seeds with a startling array of colors. Barnes called it, "Glass Gem."

A seed cannot grow until it is buried in the ground. And what is the ground made of? No matter how stony or sandy or full of clay your ground is, the ground is a community of life made out of death. The soil is a living, breathing thing that depends on death—on fallen organic matter—for the health of every other thing. Organic matter—the rotten, the failed, the discarded and dead—makes up only 3-7 percent of most soils, but that organic matter makes every new life—and thousands, if not millions of vital chemical interactions between air, water, and minerals—possible. If you can see the world through the eyes of Jesus, you can see it happening, too: this miracle, this new covenant, written on the heart of Creation, that everything that falls to the earth will be lifted up again.

Each time Carl Barnes planted the seeds given him by other Native people, those seeds

carried with them the pain of generations of people driven from their homelands. Those seeds were buried in the name of all the children and elders who had fallen to the earth, shot by soldiers, devastated by disease, or later broken by abuse in residential schools as their languages and traditions were beaten out of them. Every seed he planted carried stories of loss with it into the ground... and every time he harvested, he ensured that both the stories and the seeds would be kept alive and shared.

I ordered them this year from a seed company in Maine. They've travelled this far. And I'm eager to plant these seeds. I'm hungry for new life. But it's not just me. Every one of you—whether you're a farmer or not, even if you've never played in the dirt of your own garden—every one of you knows what it's like to find the dark reminders of death caked under your own fingernails. Every one of you has had the dark furrows of your life turned and broken open. Every one of you knows what it's like to water the ground with your tears.

So many things—and so many people—are falling to the ground. But the promise written on our hearts is this: no seed shall ever be forgotten. No death will not be transformed. And even the Lord of Life shall suffer and die and enter the earth's embrace, but his life and his story will grow again, seeds handed from one to another, a rainbow covenant, renewing the face of the earth.

--Preached by Rev. Holly Morrison, pastor

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