

Kurigasawa Baptist Church, March 1, 2026, Sunday Worship Sermon
“A Kernel of Wheat” John 12:20-26 Pastor Kazumitsu Kimura

We are now in the forty days before Easter known as Lent in the church calendar. In keeping with this liturgical season, we have chosen John 12:20 and following as our passage for worship this morning. It recounts the events of Jesus' final week, beginning with Palm Sunday when he entered Jerusalem riding on a colt. The Lord Jesus timed this entry into Jerusalem to coincide with the Jewish Passover festival. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is portrayed as visiting Jerusalem during the festival season when large crowds gathered, presenting himself as the one who testifies to who he is before many people. Moreover, Jesus' visit to Jerusalem was not a single occurrence. From this, biblical scholars suggest that Jesus' public ministry (his life of preaching) likely lasted not just one year, but at least three years.

The Passover festival begins on the fifteenth day of the month of Nisan in the Jewish calendar. This marks the Jewish New Year, with the Passover festival initiating the new year. When converted to the solar calendar, this corresponds to the season between March and April. As the greatest Jewish festival, Passover required all adult males living within a 20-kilometer radius to participate in worship. During the week-long festival, hundreds of thousands of Jews are believed to have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for worship. Verse 20 today mentions that among these pilgrims were some Greeks. You might wonder why Greeks were participating in a Jewish festival, but there is a reason. In Jesus' time 2000 years ago, even among foreigners of different races and ethnicities, there were many who were drawn to the teachings and doctrines of Judaism, which worshipped the one God, or who sympathized with Judaism's pure teachings and ethics. They may not have been circumcised converts to Judaism. Yet they were undoubtedly people who feared God. In that sense, Jerusalem was already an international city 2000 years ago. When I traveled to Israel in 2012 and stayed at a hotel in Jerusalem, I woke up one morning and turned on the TV to watch the news. As I flipped through the channels, I was astonished. Each channel broadcast news in a different language. News was streaming in Hebrew, English, German, French, and more. I listened to the news in English, thinking, “Learning a foreign language here must be incredibly efficient.” Incidentally, I heard Israel has a Ministry of Tourism. Attracting as many foreigners as possible and supporting the tourism industry is a crucial task and priority for the Israeli government.

At this time, the Greeks who had come to Jerusalem had likely already heard the rumors about the Lord Jesus in the city. For instance, the recent event where Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead had become the talk among the Jews. So they were eager to meet this Jesus somehow. They went to Philip, one of the twelve disciples, and pleaded, “We would like to see Jesus.” The Greek word translated as “Please” here literally means “Lord.” Philip was one of Jesus' disciples, not Jesus himself. Therefore, the New Common Translation renders it as ‘Please’ rather than “Lord.” (The previous vernacular translation rendered this as “You.”) In any case, what we can say here is that they adopted an extremely humble attitude in seeking to meet Jesus. They considered the Lord Jesus to be a figure far too awe-inspiring for people like themselves. It seems likely that these Greeks who had come to Jerusalem at this time had already heard the rumors about the Lord Jesus in the city. For instance, the recent event where Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead had become a topic of discussion among the Jews. Thus, they wanted to meet this Jesus somehow. So, they went to Philip, one of the twelve disciples, and pleaded, “Please, we want to see Jesus.” The Greek word translated as ‘please’ here literally means “Lord.” Philip was one of Jesus' disciples, not Jesus himself. Therefore, the New Common Translation renders it as “Please,” not “Lord.” (The previous vernacular translation rendered this as “You.”) In any case, what we can say here is that they adopted an extremely humble attitude in seeking to meet Jesus. They considered the Lord Jesus to be a figure far too awe-inspiring for people like themselves. They likely asked Philip to mediate because his name was Greek. Bethsaida in Galilee, Philip's hometown, was an area where many Greeks lived. Upon hearing this request, Philip relayed it to another disciple, Andrew. It is noteworthy that Andrew was also a disciple with a Greek name. Perhaps meeting with Gentiles was unusual for the Lord Jesus. That might be why Philip thought it best to ask Jesus together with another person.

Now, regarding this Andrew, I want to draw your attention to the fact that in the Gospel of John, he is portrayed as a figure bearing a particularly important role, a key disciple. Look at John chapter 1, verse 35 and following. (Page 164) Verse 40 of this passage states, “One of the two who heard John's words and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.” This Andrew then went to meet his brother Simon and told him, “We have found the Messiah.” In other words, in this Gospel, Andrew was the first among the Twelve Disciples (even before Peter) to encounter Jesus and to share this news with Peter. When we consider what the vital church ministry of ‘evangelism’ entails, the Bible

teaches us that it means “becoming like Andrew.” It means telling those who have not yet met Jesus about Him. Last week, I spoke on the phone with Ms. Kaori Sion, the flutist we plan to invite as a guest for the “Summer Music Worship Service,” an event organized by the Evangelism Committee. After discussing the budget and schedule, I mentioned that we would like to request about 30 minutes of flute praise and testimony during the service, if possible. Ms. Sion replied, “Thirty minutes is too short. I would need at least 40 minutes.” She was full of enthusiasm, and I was overwhelmed by her passion. Everyone, please invite your friends and acquaintances to this year's Music Worship service in the fourth week of July. Another thing that surprised me was that Ms. Sion immediately told a friend living in Matsudo about being invited to Kurigasawa Church and said she wanted to bring that friend along on the day. She's truly embodying the spirit of Andrew. Let us strive to follow her example.

Jesus heard the request of these two men. It is not written whether he actually met with the Greeks. However, upon hearing that his name had become widely known even among the Greeks, Jesus says in verse 23, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” In the Gospel of John, the phrase “Jesus' time” appears eight times in total. For example, at the wedding in Cana, Jesus tells his mother Mary, “My time has not yet come.” But starting from chapter 12, the expression changes to “My time has come.” And then the famous words follow: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a kernel of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” Here, John describes the process of a kernel of wheat being sown into the earth and sprouting as “dying.” Yet that a kernel of wheat grows to produce ears of wheat and yields abundant fruit. Jesus' own life is said to be the same. That is, the Son of Man will soon be denounced by the Jews, arrested, and crucified. But on the third day, He will rise again, reveal Himself to His disciples, and grant eternal life and salvation to those who believe. In other words, Jesus says that “the hour when the Son of Man is glorified” is precisely the moment He is crucified.

Why is death on the cross a moment of glory? Here lies a great paradox of the Christian faith: in biblical faith, death is not the end of life, but rather the beginning of life. If a kernel of wheat remains untouched, safely stored away, it remains just one kernel of wheat and bears no fruit. It bears fruit only when it is thrown into the dark earth, buried in the ground as if laid in a tomb. Similarly, faith in Jesus as Savior came into being because He died on the cross and was buried. The church grew because of the life-risking faith and sacrifice of many disciples. Jesus states this in the following verse 25: “Whoever loves their life will lose it, and whoever hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” To love one's life means to live prioritizing one's own advancement, worldly success, and personal safety. But Jesus says such a life cannot attain eternal life. Why? Because life is not our own; it is a gift from God, and God requires us to use it in a way that pleases Him. In other words, to hate one's life means to abandon a self-centered existence consumed solely by personal advancement and gain, neglecting others, and instead choose a life of service to others. Why do people live? For what purpose were they born? According to the Bible, it is because “it is better for me that you are here.” The purpose of life is to please God. God delights when we become like a kernel of wheat, sacrificing ourselves to serve those close to us. The Christian life is choosing to live for someone else.

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies”—today's scripture verse is also known from the work of French Nobel laureate André Gide. Yet another work exists where the same words appear at the novel's opening, serving as its central theme verse. Do you know that work? It is Dostoyevsky's masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is one of my favorite novels, a lengthy work in three volumes that I often read on the train during my student commute. Looking at its opening, this scripture is quoted on the page before the main text begins. Actually, there's an episode related to this novel. It's a real experience of Dr. Shigeaki Hinohara, who served as director of St. Luke's Hospital. On March 30, 1970, the Japan Airlines “Yodo” flight heading from Haneda to Fukuoka Airport was hijacked by the Japanese Red Army. The passengers and the plane were detained at Gimpo Airport in South Korea, where negotiations between South Korean authorities and the Red Army lasted four days. Dr. Hinohara was among the passengers. The hijackers possessed dynamite, and there was a risk they might use it to blow themselves up if negotiations failed. During the four-day detention, he was reportedly told, “We will lend you the Red Army's journal or books brought aboard. If there is anything you wish to read, please ask.” Among them was this copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dr. Hinohara borrowed the book and opened it. Then, these words from the Gospel of John leapt out at him. Seeing them, he recalled feeling his heart filled with peace through the words, “Even if I die here, I will bear much fruit.”

We too are but “a kernel of wheat.” The life and death of that wheat lie in God's hands. If so, let us live as today's scripture teaches—dying to gain eternal life. God uses our service to accomplish His work. We desire to walk a rich life that brings life to others, becoming servants who please God.

Let us pray.