

## Falling Upward

How many of you know what an oxymoron is? My dictionary says it's "a combination of contradictory or incongruous words." As an example it uses "cruel kindness."

The words "falling upward" are what we would call an oxymoron. They don't make sense together; they're contradictory. When something falls, it falls down, not up. Like tree leaves. Acorns. Rain. Hail. When you drop something, it falls down, not up. Rocks. Car keys. When you trip on something, you fall down, not up. (Some of us know what that's like! I tripped in Keith and Judy's driveway once and had to get my elbow e-rayed.)

*Falling Upward* happens to be the name of a book by the well-known, Franciscan monk from Albuquerque N.M., Richard Rohr. He has written a lot of books about Christian spirituality, and in particular about life as a journey of faith. In his book *Falling Upward* Rohr suggests that everyone, sooner or later, experiences a major "fall," or failure, or sin, or disillusionment of some kind. A fall that feels so complete or catastrophic it seems we have hit rock bottom, and therefore have nowhere to go but up. At such times, Rohr says, we have an opportunity to begin what he describes as our "second journey." Life, he says, is comprised of two journeys (or "halves," not meaning to imply that they are of equal duration). And this transition from the first journey or half of life to the second is what he calls "falling upward." More on that later.

This morning's text from the Gospel of John is full of oxymorons. Or we could say it is one big oxymoron. Jesus seems to be talking in riddles. "Those who love their life lose it," he says in verse 25, "and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." It's like he's turning life itself on its head. It's confusing. Doesn't make sense. And yet, there's something tantalizing about the things he says, as if there's a part of us that can glimpse, ever so slightly, the truth beneath the contradiction.

This, perhaps, is why "some Greeks" showed up in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival known as Passover. For John to refer to them as Greek most likely meant they were not Jews. They were, in other words, Gentiles. Outsiders. Maybe they were interested in becoming Jews (another term for which is "proselyte"). Or maybe they simply wanted to meet Jesus. To refer to them as "some Greeks" could also imply that they were philosophically minded, deep thinkers attracted to mysterious truths and hidden wisdom. Very likely they had heard about Jesus, about some of the things he did and said. So, John says, they "came to Philip" and said to him "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." They called Philip "kyrie," which often means "lord" but in our context is translated "sir," either way a term of respect, suggesting they thought Philip, as one of Jesus' disciples, might have special access to this mysterious truth and hidden wisdom. Philip told Andrew, and together these two went and told Jesus. Whether the "Greeks" themselves ever actually got to personally meet Jesus, we never find out. But Jesus once again begins to teach, apparently not just his disciples but whomever was within earshot. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

Say what? There are at least three riddles in that single sentence. What "hour" is he talking about, that has suddenly and dramatically arrived? Who is he talking about when he says the "Son of Man?" And above all, what does he mean by the word "glorified?" You would think it means to be honored, made great or divine, to be cheered and hallowed and "lifted up" by everyone. To be having a really good day.

But then, in the very next verse, he talks about falling. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (Those “Greeks” would have loved that!)

Now, being a city boy (or at least a “townie type”), I have a lot to learn about farming and agriculture and common sense things like that. First of all, let me just clarify: if I’m holding in my hand a grain of wheat, and I drop it, which direction does it fall, down or up? (Down. Thank you.) Second, when a grain of wheat falls down into the ground, does it actually die? Let me ask our farmers. Marlin? Jim? Neal? Yes? No? Should I add “maybe” or “it depends” as options?

Okay, so whatever happens to it while it’s in the ground, what happens next? It sprouts. Begins growing. And in which direction does it grow, down or up? I could ask our kids that. Two weeks ago Judy had them plant seeds of wheat in little dishes of dirt. Today, they’re sprouting, right? Up or down? Up; you grown-ups should to in the fellowship hall after worship to see for yourself. In what direction is all the wheat in the beautiful, green fields we drive by every day growing? Up. Obviously, there is a relationship between falling down and growing up. Let’s call that relationship “falling upward.”

Back to our text from John, at verse 32 Jesus says this: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” After which John adds, “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” In other words, lifted up on a cross. Shamefully killed, on a cross. After which, what happens next? As we’ll see in our Maundy Thursday service in eleven days, Jesus will be taken down from the cross, and buried in a tomb (which is not quite “in the earth” but close enough). And then, what? For that of course we must wait until Easter.

Jesus’ death is nothing less than falling upward. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (By the way, I wanted to clarify one more thing with our farmers. How many grains or kernels of wheat are there in a head? All from a single, fallen, dead grain. I also Googled it, and Google says there are 50 kernels in one head of wheat. Sounds like a biblical number to me!)

He says to his disciples and all those who were listening (and again the Greeks would have loved this), unless you die, you will not live. Unless you fall, you will not rise. Unless you go down, you will not go up. “Whoever serves me must follow me,” he tells the crowd. “All the way to the cross,” he could have added.

There are all kinds of ways of falling upward, Jesus is trying to teach us. By loving life—by holding tightly onto it—you will lose it. By hating life—by letting it go—you will keep it. And in fact, it will become what he calls “eternal life.”

There are all kinds of ways of falling upward, Richard Rohr is trying to tell us. Failure of some kind. Some major sin, or scandal. An experience of deep humiliation or complete and total shame. And in all of this, we must allow ourselves to die. We must learn to let go. We must yield ourselves to the process.

Some of you know I’m a big fan of the so-called “Serenity Prayer” from Alcoholics Anonymous, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Did you also know that the very first step of the famous “Twelve Steps” that lead to recovery from any kind of addiction is to admit our total helplessness, and our complete dependence on a “higher power?” Sounds to me like another way of falling upward.

Please pray with me. God, teach us what it means to fall upward. Help us how to do it. Today, and from this day forward. Amen.