

At first it doesn't sound so bad. We allow school children to do it -- plant little seeds and watch them grow. Let's consider it from the perspective of that grain of wheat. What really happens?

First, the seed is ripped away from the head of wheat -- its source of life and nourishment. Next it is thrown wildly to the ground where it's "buried alive." Thinking things have calmed down for a while, instead the grain is cracked open, drowned, and stretched into something new. "What is happening to me?" might be an appropriate cry! I have never experienced this before! Then it forces its way out of the ground, where it finally experiences the warmth of the sun.

Or consider an alternative. The grain of wheat is gathered in the harvest, and again separated from its source of life and nourishment. Only this time it's stomped, ground up, made into flour, mixed up with a bunch of strangers, thrown into a very hot oven to be baked, and then eaten.

So Jesus' statement packs a wallop -- unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. This is no simple matter; it is a terrifying transforming experience. Who wants to be a grain of wheat?

And yet somehow, the grain of wheat has been designed for this. In an important way, Jesus reminds us, human life is designed for this experience of dying. How can we accept that death is a part of life, a part of being human (that dying is not a weakness or failure on our part)?

This is hard to hear, hard to believe, and hard to live. We look for some kind of proof or reassurance that it's true; that this is really the way the world has been designed; that we can really believe this truth about death as a passage to life. We see some signs externally, but inside, there are doubts. We need something inside us, to tell us it's so, that it's true, that we were really designed for this, and that we can not only survive this but gain eternal life. Maybe all of life is actually the period of time we prepare to die well?

The prophecy of Jeremiah uses an image of God writing on our hearts -- writing the covenant on our hearts within, rather than on cold stone tablets. When something is written on our hearts, we might use another image -- it's something that we believe in our guts, something that gives us strength in the face of doubt and fear. It moves from knowledge in our head to something we hold dear to our hearts, or from knowledge to faith.

Lent and Easter are the times to move from the knowledge of our mortality to a real belief in our mortality. They are the seasons to move from knowledge of our design to change, to grow, and to be transformed, into a belief that we will change, and grow, and be transformed. It may be a terrifying experience. But unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. Who wants to be "just a grain of wheat?"

Today Barb renews her commitment to that faith. She steps forward to profess her belief in what Christ has told us, and to live out that faith as a member of the Catholic Church. Perhaps it is an opportunity to claim that faith for yourself, not only in your head but in your guts.