

## JESUS VS. THE GRIM REAPER

Jn 12:21-36; Rev. 3:19-22; Charles Bremer Funeral; March 11, 2023

When a church member dies, one of the first things that happens is that his or her “member card” is pulled from the current file and put into the former members file, with the note that membership ended with death. On the card is basic information like date and place of birth, date and church of Baptism and Confirmation, sponsors’ names, wife’s maiden name and date of marriage, names of children, and, written in pencil, is the home address. Charlie’s address on his card is simply “Route 3,” a country address, often a farm site, which it was in this case. Is there really such a thing as a “fully retired” farmer?

When his health still permitted it, my wife Deb and I could count on him stopping by our place in the summer with freshly picked sweet corn. In October during “pastor appreciation month” he would stop by with a gift of beer he selected from a liquor store in the cities or with a gift certificate to the Fairmont Liquor Store. (I’m not sure what that has to do with farming, but they were always nice gifts.) Charlie and Barb have always been generous and supportive of their pastors and their families. He will be missed.

God’s Word speaks of the life and death of Christians in farming terms: planting and harvesting. The Gospel Reading from John 12 I chose for today is heard often at the funeral service or out at the cemetery afterwards. Jesus said: **“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.”**

This passage describes physical death like a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying, a description of planting grain. But the “death” of the seed, something we describe as its germination, leads to it bearing much fruit at the harvest. Jesus is referring here to His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, and the fruit that He bears are the Christians who are baptized into His death and resurrection.

The goal of planting a seed is that it ripen for the harvest. Charles Edward was baptized into Christ and became part of the “**much fruit**” that Jesus refers to. Jesus says that those who “**serve Him follow Him.**” Jesus came to bring in His harvest, so we must follow Jesus into death to go with Him to heaven and the resurrection from the dead. Charlie has followed Jesus to where He is; God the Father has honored him by bringing him to heaven.

God’s Word uses the harvest as a picture of God bringing in souls to heaven. The superstitious world has associated death with a “grim reaper,” a dark, ghostly figure, hooded and carrying a sickle, a curved blade with a long handle used to harvest grain or cut grass. The Grim Reaper comes to mow us down in death. The image of the Grim Reaper at our door coming to get us is frightening, something we want to escape if we can. The Grim Reaper comes knocking on our door to bring death to our house, to cut us down like a sickle reaping wheat.

In stark contrast to this is the image of Jesus coming to knock at the door of our hearts. Charlie’s Confirmation verse was Revelation 3:20, which is Jesus saying: “**Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me**” (KJV). This verse has inspired paintings of Jesus knocking at a door at night, but He has in His hand a lantern, not a sickle; unlike the darkness of death brought by a grim reaper, Jesus comes to bring us light in His presence.

This is what Jesus did in Charlie’s life. He was brought out of the dark and into the light of Christ at his Baptism. His pastor gave him this Confirmation verse as a reminder that he needed to keep living in the light of Christ throughout his life, hearing God’s Word and receiving the Lord’s Supper to forgive his sins. That’s how God would keep him in the true faith in body and soul until Christ would bring him into His harvest in heaven. Jesus promised Charlie, and all who keep the true faith in this world: “**The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with Me on My throne, as I also conquered and sat down with My Father on His throne.**” In my mind’s eye I can still see Charlie sitting in his recliner at home. Now he shares Jesus’ royal throne in heaven.

Jesus comes and knocks at the doors of our hearts. He states why He does this: **Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.** God's love in Christ for Charlie was shown in calling him to repent of his sins. Charlie's repentance was seen in his desire to receive the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of his sins. It was also seen in the way he looked at his deteriorating health, not as God punishing him for his sins, but as a reminder that he needed saving from his sins, and Jesus was his Savior.

In the Gospel Reading from John 12 we hear how some Greeks wanting to see Jesus, and His response to them. This took place during Holy Week, the days leading up to Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection; it was around this time of the year almost 2,000 years ago. Jesus knew that the "**hour**" of his suffering and death on the cross was at hand, and said: "**Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself.**" He said **this to show by what kind of death He was going to die.**

Charlie loved his children, grandchildren, and great granddaughters so much. Where he is now, with Jesus in heaven, he wants for all of you. Charlie's Lord was lifted up on the cross to draw him to Jesus in faith, a faith that all people need to be saved. Jesus knocked on the door of Charlie's heart and brought light to him, the light he now has in the glories of heaven. Jesus reminds all of us who remain here on earth with this: "**The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.**" Jesus knocks on the doors of our hearts to bring us into His light forever.

Barb reminded me of what Charlie said to me at my second-last visit to them before he died. He had just gotten back from another difficult stay in the hospital, where he very well could have died but didn't. He said to me, "I guess God is not ready for me yet." Charlie did not see his coming death as caused by the dark Grim Reaper, but as Jesus coming to take him to sup with Him in the heavenly banquet that has no end. Jesus says; **If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there will my servant be also.** Amen.