

John 12:20-33

Preached via Zoom for Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

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## **Again and Again: We Are Reformed**

Growing up, there were three massive red oak trees in my front yard. Until I experienced the glory of the Redwood tree, these oaks were the most magical species I had ever encountered. And though Redwoods are stunning, these oaks still hold a special place in my heart, because these beauties were the first trees I fell in love with. That might sound silly to some, but I really do have a serious love affair with trees.

I find them to be the most balanced, interesting, beautiful species on this planet. They are rooted strongly in the ground. They rely on and care for one another. They need only what is provided, sun and water and carbon, and they soak it all in, turn it to food for themselves, and clean air for us. Trees are everything I aspire to be. Grounded. Connected. Cared for and committed to caring for those around me.

I am in love with trees. And these majestic oaks were my first love. I remember as a child, every year they dropped thousands of acorns. And I remember every year, I loved to run around the yard and collect as many as I could. The funny thing is, I never did anything with them. I just liked to collect them. I liked to look upon them. Inspect them. Notice the difference in texture between their bodies and their silly little hats.

I liked to try to break them open to see what was on the inside. Which if any of you have encountered an acorn from a red oak tree, you know that this is no small feat. Their hats are beautiful, the pattern is one of nature's stunning achievements, but they are flimsy and easy to pop off. But the body of these acorns are shiny, and thick, and impossibly strong.

As a child, I wasn't super strong, so yeah, it was hard for me to break these open. In fact, the only ones I was ever able to really tear apart were those that had already begun to open on their own. The shells are that strong, which is so stunning to me, and of course part of their beauty.

They have to be strong, because within these shells, they hold the fragile possibility of life. I find it to be miraculous that a towering, majestic oak tree can be birthed from this small, impossibly strong, funky acorn.

Truly one of my favorite things about these trees were the acorns they dropped. I

loved these strange little orbs. I loved collecting and inspecting them. I found value and meaning and beauty in them, just as they were.

So, I'm noticing the slightest hint of grief just thinking about how my beloved acorns, if they are to become giant, majestic oak trees, with which I am also deeply in love, the acorns must break open so that they might give way to the life that is carefully and lovingly held within.

And if this doesn't happen, they dry up and break apart and become reincorporated into the soil, which is also beautiful and reassuring, and there's certainly a sermon here, but for different day.

Because this day, we are considering the majestic life of an oak tree, which is only possible when the acorn breaks open and allows the fragile spark within to sprout and grow and become.

If the acorn falls to the earth and dies or is collected and stored by a curious child (or chipmunk) then it is just an acorn. But if it falls and breaks open, if it is watered and nourished, if it is given space to grow and life and thrive, it becomes a majestic oak. A home for birds and squirrels. A shelter for small children seeking to escape the sun. A life-giving, air purifying, magical, majestic, larger than life itself oak tree.

It is only once the acorn breaks open that it is able to give way to the life that is carefully and tenderly held within.

I find this to be profound and beautiful and stunning, but to the acorn, I imagine it still feels like death. If given the choice, the acorn could just make a nice little bed in the soil, and live out its acorn life slowly, build a little shelter around, so that children like me couldn't easily find, collect and terrorize it. And if it was one of the lucky ones, it could live out its acorn life, and slowly, bit by bit, decompose back into the soil.

Using Jesus' metaphor, then, this acorn is a single, solitary, isolated acorn. However, if instead of insisting on its acorn life, it breaks open, gives way to a sprout, that gives way to a tree, that to the delight of every country girl and every country chipmunk, grows into a towering oak that can produce thousands upon thousands of acorns.

If it breaks open, it bears much fruit, and becomes a life-sustaining, life-giving organism, connected to so many beings around it, and it lives like this for years and years and years. But only if it breaks open.

If it forsakes its life as an acorn, which as an acorn lover, I maintain is a pretty cool life ... however, the life that is possible when the acorn allows itself to crack open, well, that is more than cool, that is the only true life there is.

Those who love their life as a strong shelled, walled off, stubborn acorn, will only ever be a single, isolated and limited being.

But those who forsake this isolated life and allow themselves to be broken open, they will keep their life because they will come into their true life.

It's not without risk or cost. It's not without pain and hurt. Breaking open feels like death, no matter how you look at it. And that's because it is. Breaking open requires a kind of a dying. We die to one way of being, in order to truly live.

As Bonhoeffer says, this is the costly grace which our God offers us. It is costly, because it costs us our lives, or way of understanding the whole, our way of being in the world, but it is also grace, because it gives way to the only *true* life.

The question posed to us, then, is: are we content living as acorns?

Covered in hard, resistant, impossibly strong shells? Unbreakable, untouchable, self-sustaining, and in need of no one or nothing.

It's tempting, is it not?

There is a lot of suffering and pain and anxiety and fear all around and within us. And it is tempting to shield ourselves from the suffering of the world. It is tempting to hide our own wounds. To build up defenses that keep us safe from anything that might threaten our acorn lives. Like I said, acorns have cool little hats, their bodies are shiny and strong, stunning in their own right. It makes sense to be content in our little, acorn lives.

But my friends, we know deep down in our beings, there exists a fragile, stunning possibility, a glimmer of life with the hope of becoming. And in our stubbornness to live our nice, comfortable acorn lives, we snuff out the possibility of growth, the possibility of becoming, the possibility of our only true life.

However fragile it may feel, there is true life dwelling just behind this hard, outer shell, and we may sometimes feel like we are protecting it, but in truth, we cannot sustain it behind this hard shell.

The only true way to sustain it, to allow it to thrive, is to bring it into being. To risk being broken open so that it might grow and stretch and become. It is a kind of death, there is no doubt about that, but it is a death that leads to the only true life there is.

I need to make a quick distinction here, because I want to be very clear that when I am talking about this shell which protects the life within us, I am not talking about boundaries.

Setting healthy boundaries in our relationships is not the same as building impenetrable walls around ourselves. In fact, healthy boundaries can help us live more fully and truly.

Boundaries of time can help us carve out space where we can connect with and love on our families and ourselves.

Emotional boundaries can help us process with the right people at the right time. So that we can move towards wholeness and healing, and not feel like we're always bearing our souls only to be further harmed.

Healthy boundaries can help us grow and learn, because they can help provide space for us to break open in ways that feel safe and generative.

It is a good, life-giving practice to create and maintain healthy boundaries.

The hard, impenetrable shells, however, are not the same as healthy, life-giving, life-sustaining boundaries. They are dividing walls, and they only deal in death.

These kinds of walls are invaluable tools for the powers that be, the powers of the world, the powers of the empire. For these powers seek to divide and conquer. To maintain their power through violence and subjection.

And to convince all subjects that the only way to survive is to isolate. To surround oneself with protections, securities, that ensure only our survival, even at the cost of the survival of our neighbors.

Each of us, literally and figuratively, is tempted to build a little acorn home and lead a little acorn life. And I'm not actually an historian, but I'm pretty sure that today in the United States of America, it's as tempting perhaps as it's ever been. Because it's mainstream. It's baked into every aspect of our ideology, our story, our values as a nation.

The foundational creed of the United States Empire is White Supremacy. And we know that when taken to extremes this looks like the KKK and the Oathkeepers. It looks like violence perpetrated by white men over and over again, oftentimes without repercussion, in the case of police shootings of unarmed black people, and other times disgustingly understandable. “The shooter in Atlanta had a bad day, and this is what happened.”

My friends, we can see it when it’s taken to these extremes. We can name it. Denounce it. Get behind catchy hashtags and slogans. And we can do it from behind the impossibly strong shells we have put around our own hearts. The shells which have been designed and financed by White Supremacy, INC.

The walls have been erected around each and every one of us, whether we see them or not, whether we built them ourselves or they were built for us, whether we are working to tear them down or feeling exhausted by the labor-intensive work, these walls surround us. And these walls tell us that without them, we are not safe. Without them, we will die.

Friends, I am grief stricken and I am furious by the ways in which we allow these walls to continue dealing death to people of color. To women. To Asian women. To sex workers. To black folx and indigenous folx. To queer people.

To any person whom our White Supremacist Society has deemed a threat to our little, acorn lives.

In her letter to the congregation this week, Pastor Irene asked us to grapple with the question: who are we and who will we be in this time?

It is no longer an option to live as an acorn because we are afraid of the breaking open required to live as a tree. I think we know by now that our acorn “lives” only lead to death. And so we must ask ourselves: Will we risk our comfort, our security, our very lives? Will we die to lies of White Supremacy, so that we might live in the truth of God?

Will we be closed-off, self-serving acorns, living a nice, little acorn life?

Or will we risk breaking open so that we might become majestic trees that are deeply connected to our surroundings, caring for and being cared for by those around us, rooted, life-giving and life-sustaining, living the only true life?

I still like acorns, and I understand the temptation to live like one, but I hope and I pray that we choose life.

In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. Amen.