

First Presbyterian, Kissimmee, FL
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Subject: Sermon: "We Want to See Jesus"

John 12:20-33 (NRSV)

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. [21] They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." [22] Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. [23] Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. [24] Very truly, I tell you, 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. [25] Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. [26] Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

[27] "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. [28] Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." [29] The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." [30] Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. [31] Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. [32] And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." [33] He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

WE WANT TO SEE JESUS

"We want to see Jesus." That's was the request that some Greeks made long ago.

And that's the whole point of John's gospel. John's gospel helps us see Jesus. It is not a historical account of all that happened. It's an evangelistic tract. John said that he wrote his gospel so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing we might have eternal life. (See John 20:33)

In pulpits all over the country these words remind preachers of their job. A slip of paper taped inside the lectern reads, "Sir, we would see Jesus."

My job is not to dazzle you with feats of oratorical skill. My job is not to tell you what you want to hear. My job is not to make you feel guilty about all that you have done wrong.

My job is the task that confronted Philip and Andrew long ago. My job is simply to bring you to Jesus. My job is to help you see Jesus, the real Jesus, the Jesus who is presented in the gospels, and the Jesus who reveals the way to true life.

Nothing else is important because we believe that in the life of Jesus we have a portrait of God that can change our lives forever.

In today's lesson Jesus himself helps me with my task. In response to the request from these inquiring Greeks, Jesus tells us three important things that we must keep in mind if we are to truly see him.

HOW JESUS IS GLORIFIED

First, we must understand how Jesus is glorified. When Philip and Andrew came with the request of the Greeks to see him, Jesus responds by saying, "Now the time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

And then Jesus describes that glory with an analogy. He said that his glory is like the glory of a grain of wheat. It falls into the ground, "dies" and then yields more wheat. The grain of wheat yields much more life giving grain if it is planted, if it is used as seed.

Jesus is referring to his impending death. Many will view his death on the cross as an unspeakable tragedy, the final defeat. But, Jesus does not view the cross in this way. Jesus sees the cross as the way to glory. Jesus sees the cross as a way of bringing a greater salvation to the world.

The word translated “glorified” means to be honored, to be magnified. What an unusual revelation! What many see as the ultimate dishonor, to be crucified on the cross, Jesus sees as the ultimate honor.

His glory and the glory of God are seen most clearly in this terrible moment. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God opens up a window into eternal reality. Death does not have the final word. Evil and despair will not reign forever.

A CALL TO SERVICE

Second, we learn that there is a connection between this strange glory of Jesus and what Jesus wants us to do. In the gospel of John, the prediction of the Passion is connected with a call to service.

To put it another way, we are called to glory in the cross. We are called to take up a cross and follow Jesus by denying ourselves for the sake of others.

We do this not because we think that the things of the world are necessarily bad in and of themselves. We just know that the things of this world, even the best things are temporary.

From a worldly perspective when we think of the word “glory” we think of honors, awards and promotions. Perhaps we think of the ticker tape parades that we used to give our returning heroes.

But, there will come a time when all the things that the world values will come to an end. The glory of the world is fleeting.

A TOMBSTONE RESUME

A preacher told of jogging through a cemetery when a tombstone caught his eye. It had so much written on it that he just had to stop and read it.

It was in essence the man's resume. It was a long list of the man's degrees, awards and achievements. It was as if the family wanted his stone to stand out among all the others.

His tombstone may have stood out, but his condition was the same as everyone around him. He was buried. His glorious achievements didn't mean a thing. It was sad, this resume on a tombstone. As the Apostle Paul put it, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." 1 Corinthians 15:19 (NRSV)

But, Jesus tells us that it doesn't have to be this way. If we understand the message of the cross, then we are freed to live in a different way. Temporary glory does not mean so much to us. We are given a hope that is eternal and a life that is not dependent upon this temporary glory.

HATING OUR LIFE

Jesus said, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." John 12:25 (NRSV)

Don't be distracted by the word "hate" in this verse. It is bit of hyperbole that was common in Jesus day.

It's like what we might say when someone asks us how our softball team did against Trinity Lutheran last week. We might say, "We killed them."

We didn't kill them. We prayed with them after the ball game. It's just a way of saying that we played very well.

In the same way Jesus doesn't mean that we actually hate our life in this world; we just put the things of this world into perspective. Compared to the glory of eternal life that is ours through the cross of Christ, the things of this world are indeed rubbish.

That's what Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians,

“... Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant ... I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ...” Philippians 3:8 (MsgB)

FOLLOW ME TO JORDAN

Jesus goes on to explain further what he means in verse 26 of today's lesson. In John 12:26 (NRSV) we read, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

In order to see Jesus we have to follow him. The words to our anthem this morning put it well. Jesus said, “Follow me to Jordan. Follow me on home. Every day he will show me the way, until I reach the Promised Land.”

In other words life in Christ is about trust, trusting that God will give us what we need when we need it.

We could paraphrase the words of Jesus in this way, “Everyone who is overly invested in the things of this life will soon lose sight of what life is really about. They will wind up defeated by death.

But, those who face death as they follow me will not be defeated. I will be with them now and forever. They will share my fate, but they will also share my future.”

THE PURPOSE OF THE CROSS

So, when we look at Jesus we see one who is glorified by the cross, we see one who expects us to take up a cross and follow him and third we see one who died for a purpose.

According to the Bible, the cross was not an accident. The cross was a part of God's plan.

In our lesson for today we have an echo of the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus seemed to struggle with his impending death on the cross. Jesus said in our passage for today that his soul was troubled and that he might be inclined to ask his Father to save him from this “hour.”

But, Jesus does not make that request. He knows that his sacrificial death on the cross is God’s plan for bringing forgiveness into the world and defeating the powers of darkness. And his decision is confirmed by a voice from heaven. God will be glorified through the cross of Christ.

Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

John 12:32 (NRSV) If you want to see the character of God as revealed in Christ, we must see the Son of God high and lifted up on a cross.

PRAYER DOESN’T WORK?

Did you read in the paper this week about the study they did on intercessory prayer at Harvard? There were three groups of heart patients.

One group had people they did not know pray for them, and they were told that these people were praying for them. One group had people they did not know pray for them, and they were not told that these people were praying for them. Finally, there was a control group that had nobody praying for them.

The groups did about the same when it came to complications after surgery except for the group that had people praying for them and knew the people were praying for them. They had more complications!

I guess you might be led to conclude that prayer doesn’t “work” at least intercessory prayer by strangers. More than that, if your doctor tells you that he or she has people praying for you, you might begin to

doubt their skill as physicians or think that you're worse off than you first thought! Thus, your anxiety produces complications!

But, I would invite you to think about the theological assumptions made by this study. Does this study make sense from a Christian perspective? Does this study fit with what we believe about God as revealed in Jesus Christ?

Do we really believe in a God who only heals people when a certain number of people pray? It's almost like God doesn't want to heal us but if we have enough people praying for us then God can be persuaded reluctantly to bring about healing.

More than that, this study assumes that God can be influenced in an almost primitive way. Prayer becomes like the shaman offering his "voodoo" to influence the divine powers beyond our understanding.

This view of God does not assume any kind of personal relationship with the Divine nor does it assume any kind of personal relationship with the person doing the praying.

GOD REVEALED ON THE CROSS

But it occurs to me that God as revealed in Jesus is the opposite of the God assumed in this study. Prayer is communication with God. Prayer grows out of a relationship with God and a relationship with the people that we pray for.

The Bible tells us that God wants a relationship with His people. God is not an impersonal deity who is hard of hearing. God does not reluctantly reveal Himself after much cajoling.

God voluntarily reveals Himself from the very beginning. Before we can come to God, God comes to us. And God bids us to go in his name to others. It is always personal when it comes to prayer.

God seeks us out. God has a plan and purpose to save the world, and it involves the revelation and sacrifice of His precious Son.

God in Christ becomes a part of our suffering and pain. God understands. God in Christ offers healing not only for what ails us in this life but also offers us hope for the life to come.

I think that's what Jesus meant when he said

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

John 12:32 (NRSV)

The Passion of Christ represents the attitude of God toward this world. God is passionate toward the world. God gives all that He has for the world. As the Apostle Paul put it,

"He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" Romans 8:32 (NRSV)

As we read in last week's lesson, God's purpose in the cross of Christ was to demonstrate love and forgiveness for the whole world. God is not out to "get us." (John 3:16-17)

God is out to save us, and that salvation is greater than just a temporary healing of our illnesses. That salvation is a permanent healing for our sin sick soul. And that salvation is for everyone ...even those who constructed the cross and used it on God's Son.

Whenever Jesus heals in the gospels, it is always a sign of a greater salvation, a foretaste of a greater miracle. I believe that sometimes our prayers for healing are answered in a positive way as a sign of that coming kingdom in which there will be no more suffering or pain.

SAVED THROUGH OUR TROUBLES

But, I do not think that prayer works like a fence to keep the troubles of this world at bay.

All of us will suffer loss. When we do suffer we can look to the cross. We can be drawn to the fact that God in Christ suffers with us and for us.

In the Passion story we can see a God who does not save us from our troubles but a God who saves us through our troubles. God's purpose was worked out on the cross. Tragedy was turned into triumph. And in the same way God's purposes can be worked out in our lives as well. Our hour of greatest difficulty can become in the hands of God an hour of glory.

Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest and one of my favorite authors once wrote,

“It would be just another illusion to believe that reaching out to God will free us from pain and suffering. Often, indeed, it will take us where we would rather not go. But, we know that without going there we will not find our life.”

Jesus found glory in the sacrifice of the cross.

The whole world, Jews and Greeks alike, found that message incomprehensible. As Paul would put it in his letter to the Corinthians, “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom ... but we proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

If we are truly seeking Jesus, we begin to find his glory in some surprising places. We find glory in the teacher who gives a lifetime of service in a small rural school. We find glory in a coach who works two jobs so he can stay at the inner city school. We find glory in the mother who forgoes dreams of a career in business to care for her mentally challenged daughter.

I'm not exactly sure where you will find the glory of God in your life, but I do know that you won't find glory where the world expects it.

You will not find glory in those who do the victory dance in the end zone. You will not find glory in a successful career or even in the perfect, loving family.

According to Jesus, glory is found when we give ourselves away. Strength is found in weakness and salvation is found on a cross.

THE HIGH PRIEST

In the book of Hebrews we read about how the high priest was selected from among the people and appointed by God to offer gifts and sacrifices for the people. The priest was not selected because he was the best and brightest. He was selected because he was ordinary. This ordinary priest was able to sympathize with the weaknesses of his people.

According to the Scripture this priest was able to “deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.”

In the same way, Christ showed the glory of God through his weakness. Jesus was by no means above the human situation. He was a part of it. He struggled and cried. He had compassion on those who mourned the loss of a loved one. He was concerned about the crowds who were like “sheep without a shepherd.”

He was a great high priest because he understood our weakness. He was a part of our weakness. This was his glory; this was his purpose.

And this is where we shall find our purpose as well.

Today we once again embrace the mystery and hope of the Lord’s Supper. It is a way of looking upon the glory of the cross; it is a way of affirming that there is salvation in body broken and in blood shed.

And as we are served this holy feast by our Lord, we are called to serve others in his name.

May God help us see the peculiar glory of the cross.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN