

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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“The Hour Has Come”

John 12:17-33 (NRSV)

So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. [18] It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. [19] The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

[20] 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.

GOD IN A GLASS

On Good Morning America I heard of a religious cult that drinks a hallucinogenic tea. Supposedly this tea gives them a glimpse of the divine. And you thought that the Age of Aquarius had ended!

Recently a judge ruled under the Freedom Restoration Act that they did indeed have the right to drink this powerful drug because it is a part of their religion.

They talk about having “God in a glass.”

We smile and/or shake our heads when we hear of something like this, but from my experience this is what many people want. They want God in a glass.

They want a god that we can conjure up whenever they want or need him. And they want a god who will leave us alone when things are fine. They want a god who requires nothing of us and gives us everything.

If that’s what you want in a god you’ve come to the wrong place. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is not a god who is on call. He is not a god in a glass or a box or a god who remains confined to the hallowed walls of a sanctuary.

The God we serve is alive and free and unpredictable. The God we serve is a dangerous God. The God we serve longs for peace and justice and is willing to judge those things in our lives that do not measure up.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ does not go along to get along. Quite to the contrary the God revealed in Jesus Christ stirs things up. The God revealed in Jesus Christ threatens the political, religious and social fabric of society.

God's vision of change requires disciples to be involved in the conflict. God's vision of change challenges and calls would be disciples to courageous sacrifice.

GREEKS AND GLORY

You may have noticed that I have included a few more verses of Scripture in our lesson for today. The lectionary would have us begin at John, chapter 12, verse 20. In that verse Greeks come looking for Jesus. Philip and Andrew take them to Jesus, and Jesus makes what seems to be a strange statement,

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

And then Jesus starts talking in a somewhat coded way about his impending death. What does this have to do with Greeks coming to Jesus?

The verses I have added make it easier to understand. Those who saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead were telling everyone about it. The crowds got bigger and bigger.

The religious leaders were alarmed. They didn't need another Messiah leading a rebellion against the Romans. It would spell disaster for everyone. So the religious leaders not only plotted to kill Jesus for the good of the country; they also plotted to kill Lazarus as well. (John 11:53; 12:10-11)

But, their plot runs into a roadblock. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the crowds had grown too big for even the religious leaders to handle. They said, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”

And that's where the lectionary passage starts. The world (represented by the Greeks) wants to see Jesus. It was an indication of how widespread the popularity of Jesus had become. And so this innocent encounter represents a turning point in the gospel.

THE TIME HAS COME

In John's gospel the religious authorities want to harm Jesus from the very beginning, but they are unable to do so. Jesus uses a phrase over and over again to indicate this, “My time has not yet come.” (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20)

This gospel teaches us that the cross is no accident but a part of the plan of God. And this final act of the salvation play will occur only when the time is right.

After the Greek's come to see Jesus, that time has come. Jesus said, "The hour has arrived." Jesus knew what was going to happen.

He could have gone into hiding and avoided this final confrontation. But, he didn't do it. Confronting the powers that be and the powers of evil on the cross was his God given mission.

We get a sense of the turmoil that this turning point causes.

In just a few days Jesus will tell his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." But, now as he realizes that his hour has come, he confesses (much like he did in the Garden of Gethsemane), "My soul is troubled." (John 12:27)

He wrestles with the weight of this choice, but in the end he decides against self-preservation. He chooses to lay down his life for the salvation of others.

A WILLING SACRIFICE

In John's gospel Jesus always has to dodge two kinds of problems. There is the problem of those who want to crucify him, and there is the problem of those who want to crown him. No one it seems wants to really listen to him. In a way this is still true today.

Next week we'll talk about the second problem; those who wanted to crown him, to make him king. The crowd cried out, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. What they said was true, but their reason for saying it was wrong. And in the end probably some of the same ones who wanted to crown him also wanted to crucify him.

But, Jesus was not focused on what either the crowd or the authorities thought. He was focused on the will of his heavenly Father. Jesus had a choice to make. He could save his life or he could be a Savior. But, he couldn't do both.

Jesus chose to be a Savior. He laid down his life willingly for the salvation of the world.

Jesus spoke of this symbolically. He said, "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." John 12:24 (NRSV)

The purpose of a grain of wheat is to "die" so that more wheat can be produced. The purpose of a Savior is to give his life so that many more can find true life. This time of suffering would turn out to be a time of glory.

This was actually confirmed by a voice from heaven, but few were able to hear that voice. (John 12:29) We still have a hard time hearing the voice that proclaims the hour of judgment and salvation is upon us. We run away from any voice that even hints of that word "sacrifice."

But, the Bible is clear on this point. Sacrifice lies at the heart of our faith. And the sacrifice of Jesus is a model for how we should live today.

Jesus told the Greeks and he tells us, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.”

This is the great paradox of the gospel. We cannot find salvation in playing it safe and protecting our life at all costs. We can only find salvation by giving our life away.

BURN OUT OR RUST OUT?

This is a theme throughout the gospels. Jesus always insisted that the person who hoards their life must in the end lose it, and the one who spends his or her life in service to the gospel gains it.

William Barclay told of a famous evangelist by the name of Christmas Evans. He was always on the move preaching for Christ. But, his friends were afraid that he was working too hard. They advised him to take things easier for the sake of his health.

And the old evangelist always answered their concerns by saying, “It is better to burn out than to rust out.”

Most of us have been taught from a very young age the importance of self-preservation and the avoidance of pain. So, even when the message of sacrifice is spoken clearly and repeatedly (as it is in the Bible) we still are deaf to the message.

When Jesus talked about the glory of the cross he even got a loud “amen” from heaven. But, as the voice echoed in the distance the people just scratched their heads and asked, “Did it just thunder?”

The voice from heaven was loud and clear. But, no matter how loud the voice if it is a message we don’t want to hear, we will have a hard time hearing and understanding the message.

I can’t blame those early Christians for being tone deaf to the gospel. It’s still hard to hear God’s voice when he uses words like servant, cross and death.

Today when people claim to hear God’s voice they always seem to hear words like “preserve, grow and acquire.” In every age people have “reinterpreted” the gospel to make it more palatable.

But, Jesus said that he came to die and give his life away. And if we are to come after him we too must take up our cross and follow him. If we are to come after him we can’t hoard our life away. We weren’t made to rust out. We were made to burn out in glory. We were made to follow Jesus on the road to sacrifice and service.

In our lesson for today we hear that the “hour has come” for Jesus. But, the hour has also come for us as well. We too must decide. What needs to die in our lives so that Christ might live in us?

LIVING IN FEAR

In the first church I served there was an elderly couple that never came to worship. Early on in my ministry I paid them a visit and learned why. Many years ago while they were in church a thief invaded their home and stole many of their prized possessions.

From that day forward this couple not only avoided going to church but also avoided going anywhere! They were reputed to be quite wealthy, but their fear of being robbed also robbed them of happiness. Every time I visited them they would always mention this terrible incident that happened years ago.

Over the years I have thought quite a bit about this couple. They symbolized for me how many people live.

They had decided to hoard their life instead of giving it away. They were blessed with a lot of the world's goods, but it did them no good. They were prisoners of their own fears. They lived in a self imposed prison.

It occurs to me that the same thing can happen to us as well. If we are always worried about what might happen, we will be unable to follow Jesus. We will be deaf to the heavenly voice. We will be unable to take any risk for the sake of the gospel.

And in the end this will cause us to lose everything that is important.

If we are truly seeking Jesus, we will find his glory in some rather surprising places. I'm not sure where you find glory in your life, but I do know that you will not find glory where you expect it. 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 our lives away for the sake of the gospel. Strength is found in weakness, and salvation is found on a cross.

Let me give you a few examples of what this glory may look like.

EARLY "RETIREMENT"

A New England school teacher took early retirement because of health problems. One day she was visited by a divinity student who asked her for help. He felt inadequate for the task that was before him: visiting women who were prisoners in the local jail.

The retired teacher agreed to help, and while visiting this place of suffering she found conditions that were intolerable. All the women were mixed together ... those who were insane and guilty of murder were incarcerated right alongside those who were guilty of only minor crimes.

And so Dorthea Dix dedicated the rest of her life to changing things in these institutions. For over forty years, despite her poor health she labored for others. When she died, thirty mental hospitals had been started on account of her efforts for those who no one else cared about.

In her weakness ... maybe even because of her weakness ... she was strong and compassionate. In losing her life for others, Dorthea Dix found her life ... glory.

A HANDICAPPED CHILD

A young woman had talent, great talent. She graduated first in her class and landed a great job with the best commercial graphics firm in the city.

She had it all ... a great income ... married to a successful attorney. And then they had a son.

He was severely retarded with a number of physical problems. As a baby he required full time care. She and her husband agreed to look after the baby at home. Her husband would cut back on his work; she would cut back on hers.

The care of this child was a twenty four hour grueling job. Within a year her husband left, leaving a note that said in part, "I love you, but I can't take this. I've got to have a life of my own."

She quit her job and devoted full time to caring for the child. The child lived much longer than any of the doctors believed possible ... probably because the child received such loving, skilled and constant care.

But, after eight years the child died.

And when the church met for the funeral, they sang Easter songs. Speakers extolled her as an example for us all, someone who embodied Christ's message for each of us.

She gave that child eight wonderful years, and she lost her life according to the world's standards.

But, for those who were there that day ... as they reflected on the sacrifice she had made those past eight years ... they saw a life well lived ... a life with meaning. They saw glory.

ON EAGLE'S WINGS

E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to India believed passionately in the power of God to deliver us in the middle of our suffering. He wrote,

"Once I watched an eagle in the Himalayan mountains face a storm. It was a heavy storm brewing at the edge of a valley, and I wondered what the eagle would do as the storm rushed through the narrow valley.

Would it be dashed to pieces on the rocks below?

No, it set its wings in such a way that the air currents sent him above the storm by their very fury. The eagle didn't bear the storm; it used it to reach greater heights. It was glorious to watch."

We too can be like the eagle when we are confronted with the storms of life. We can set our wings directly into the storm of pain and suffering.

And with God's help we will be lifted higher than we ever thought possible. In our moment of greatest weakness we can find the strength of the One who is always with us. We can find glory in the cross.

A HILL FAR AWAY

This morning we heard (will hear) an old gospel favorite: "The Old Rugged Cross." I can remember hearing my father sing that song when I was a boy in church. I liked the melody, but quite frankly I was always confused by the lyrics.

If the old rugged cross was the "emblem of suffering and shame" how could Dad also sing, "And I love that old cross?"

It's taken me many years to understand it in just a small way. It's not just about that old rugged cross on a hill far away; it's also about you and me here and now. It's about having the faith to follow Jesus in good times and bad.

It's about being willing to sacrifice in some way for the kingdom. It's about taking up our cross.

I don't know what has to die in your life in order for you to really live.

But, this much I do know. God in Christ is continually calling us and challenging us to take up a cross. As another hymn puts it, "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for me to bear and there's a cross for you."

Don't hoard you life. Don't value self-preservation above all else.

Instead, embrace the life giving sacrifice that is embodied in the death of Jesus. Be lifted up by his cross; be changed by this symbol of salvation.

Amen.