

Drawn to the Cross

John 12:20-33 (NIV84)

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. ²³ Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. ²⁷ "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. ³⁰ Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." ³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

This morning we are jumping ahead of ourselves a bit with our Gospel reading taking place sometime after Palm Sunday but before Maundy Thursday of Holy Week. Greek converts to Judaism have come to Jerusalem to worship at the Passover Feast, just like any faithful adherent to the Jewish religion would. They go to Philip, one of the Twelve Disciples, and say, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." (verse 21)

Now before we go any further, let's just soak in for a minute what's happening. Greeks - not Jews, Greeks, the ones who are foreigners, who did not grow up generation after generation hearing the promises of God - came looking for Jesus. They didn't just want to put a face to a name; they wanted to meet this Jesus whom they had hear so much about. In the final days before Jesus' death on the cross, while people were plotting his demise, these Greeks truly wanted to get to know this Jesus and what he taught.

I bring this up because I want us to appreciate the fact that in this world, even with all the opponents of Christianity that exist, people still come through church doors on a Sunday morning because they, like these Greeks, would like to see Jesus. They want this. These are our Church shoppers, our visitors, our guests. We have the privilege, like Philip and Andrew did, to show people Jesus and spend time with him ourselves with others who want to see Jesus. God be praised that he still motivates people to this desire!

Although I could spend the whole sermon talking to you about those Greeks, that's not what Jesus does. In fact, the Greeks are not mentioned again in this account. Jesus uses their request to teach about something else. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," he says (verse 23) How? "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (verse 24)

As much as we like to have everything governed by logic, even nature has its own way of doing things that are not necessarily what we would logically think would happen. With plants, as they grow and mature, they produce seeds. These seeds only come about as they are attached to the plant. When they fall off, they are cut off from their source of life. In this way, they are dying. But the seed that just died gets planted in the ground. Although it's dead, life begins as it turns into a new plant producing its own seeds. Human life does not work this way. Death is death, stopped, ceased, kaput. We don't die to produce life. We have to live to produce life.

Think for a minute, though, if a seed refused to leave the plant it came from. It's time to come off, but no; it doesn't want to leave the plant. It would much rather stay. How are we going to produce more crops, more wheat, more food if seeds refuse to leave the plant?

Jesus sets up this plant analogy to talk about his death. But no one wants to hear about death, and no one wants to follow someone to death. Yet Jesus says that "whoever serves me must follow me." (verse 26)

Death is not an attractive prospect, even when it comes to religion. In a preaching book that I have been reading, the author encountered a pastor of a fairly successful seeker based congregation who said of his sermons, "We never mention the crucifixion of Christ. It's too gruesome for a lot of our folk. If we talked about that, many would stop coming. So we focus on the resurrection instead. The resurrection of Jesus is a positive, hopeful message." (*Apologetic Preaching* p. 89) Let's not talk about death. It's too morbid. It's awful. Let's push all this death talk off to the side. Let's talk about something hopeful instead. We see that same

mentality in our culture with those who see the cross as a symbol of death, and death alone. They don't wear crosses because they would rather focus on Jesus' life rather than his death.

It's hard for any of us to follow Jesus to his death. We try to avoid going towards death at all costs. We see doctors, get physicals, change our diets, give up a portion of our day to exercise, try out various health remedies all in the name of remaining healthy and avoiding death. We do not want to die and, quite frankly, we don't want to see people die.

With such an aversion to death, are we guilty then of loving our lives over following God? Jesus said that "the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (verse 25) How can I hate my life? Aren't I supposed to love it, care for it, honor it as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the body that God gave me that I shouldn't abuse? Yes, but does that mean we seek life at all costs? Is the preservation of my life - my way of living, what I want to do so that I can live life to the fullest - does that supersede my focus and attention from following Jesus to his death? Does my pursuit of life get in the way of me serving and loving God? If this is the case, all our efforts to keep our lives will be for nothing and we will lose that life when death inevitably comes as well as losing eternal life with God.

Jesus has this same challenge before him. Do I keep my life or do I give it up? Up to this point, it has not been Jesus' time to give up his life. He has the power. He is God. He could do it. He could decide not to die. He could make Good Friday never happen. But this would be loving his life more than loving the people he came to serve. The new covenant would not be completed, the one that says God, by what he does, will forgive all of our wickedness and remember our sins no more. The prince of this world, Satan, would remain unchallenged and undefeated. If Jesus would keep his life for himself, focus on his living only, everyone else would lose their lives to eternal damnation in hell.

This is what is riding on the line: eternal life for us, forgiveness of our wickedness. The kernel of wheat can either remain a single seed or fall to the ground and die and produce many seeds. What will you do, Jesus? He answers: "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (verses 27-28) I will do it. I will give up my life so that others can have eternal life.

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." (verse 28) The Father had already brought glory to his name by what Jesus has already done, how he lived a perfect life from start till now, without any errors, and fulfillment after fulfillment of promises he made long ago. Now Jesus is choosing to follow through on the rest of his promises. He will give up his life, like one of those seeds attached to the plant, so that he can produce many seeds, so that so many more will have life. He will die in order that all sin be judged and the prince of this world, Satan, be driven out.

Jesus will do all this in the death that he will die. "'But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' [Jesus] said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." (verses 32-33) Just like the imagery from last Sunday, Jesus will be lifted up like that bronze snake was lifted up on a pole so that everyone could see him. He must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. One person, who is true God and true Man, gives up his life so that all can have eternal life.

None of us want to watch death. None of us want to see the bloodied and bruised and beaten Jesus. I can't even bring myself to watch the Passion of the Christ again, that R-rated Mel Gibson movie that's over a decade old all about Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. But we have been drawn to the cross. It certainly is a symbol of death, of torture, of suffering, but at the same time, it is a symbol of life. By this death on the cross, God will judge sin. He will condemn it on Jesus. He will pay the price of our selfishness of wanting to live our lives and keep our lives for ourselves. By Jesus' death on the devil is sent packing, defeated. Just as we sang, "Wash me and take away each stain; Let nothing of my sin remain. For cleansing through your cross and pain, Christ crucified, I come." (CW 387:3) This is how the Father's name is glorified as Jesus chose death instead of asking for his life to be spared. This is how Jesus being lifted up on the cross to die will draw all people to himself.

Christians have used and continue to use the cross as a symbol of how death has given us life. It's in our churches and on our church buildings. It's even our church logo, a beacon of life in the shape of a cross to draw people to the one who died for you and for the whole world. We wear the cross on our clothing and jewelry. We get tattoos of it all because this is where God gave me life eternal, by being lifted up on that cross. He did what we couldn't do. He stayed the path of willing obedience to God and gave up his life for us instead of doing all he could to keep it for himself, to love his own life. He allowed himself to be that kernel of wheat that fell to the ground to produce many seeds. His death on the cross draws people of all nations to him, including us. We have been drawn to the cross. Amen.