

Sermon Lent 5B  
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant  
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John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. 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. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. “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. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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This week, our Muslim neighbors began their holy month of Ramadan, which involves a rhythm of fasting and gathering with friends and family for the ceremonial evening meal called “iḥfār.” At the end of the month, we Christian brothers and sisters will gather around our own family tables to celebrate Easter. And next month, our Jewish friends will commemorate Passover with the traditional seder meal gathered around the table with family and loved ones. “Tis the season,” I guess you could say! In homes near and far, preparations are being made, supplies are being set aside and hearts are warming with anticipation of the coming celebrations. Growing up, I could always tell the company was coming when the “good china” came out of the cupboard, when I observed my mom ironing tablecloths and when I found my dad painting trim somewhere that the passage of time and three rambunctious children had hastened the need for touch-ups. And when the day of the event came - whatever the occasion - there were just two rules for us kids: 1. Stay out of the kitchen, and 2. Be on your best behavior.

When we encounter Jesus and his disciples today, they are in the holy City, making their own preparations for Passover. All the faithful had made their way to Jerusalem to gather, to worship and to celebrate. And today’s reading from John mentions that among the crowd there were, in addition to the Jewish congregants, “some Greeks.” Outsiders - who, despite their different non-Jewish background, also wished to participate in the holy rituals that were being held there at that time.

Guests! The moment we all anticipate - the moment when guests arrive to join in the family celebrations and to share in our customs. Scripture had prepared the Jewish people to be “a light to the nations” “The nations” being shorthand for “all the other nations” - all nations outside of Israel - the gentiles. And Jesus had just made the connection, telling his disciples: “I AM the light of the world”

And here come some gentiles! “Some Greeks” as this passage refers to them. Perhaps this will be the moment when the gentiles begin to hear and to know and to believe the message of God! The passages says;

“They came to Philip...and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Then Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew...went and told Jesus. “ Alright Jesus, here they come - whatcha gonna say? How you gonna hook them? “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus replies, “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.” OK... Jesus can you say a little more....? ...Maybe something about how great it is to live life with you? “Those who love their life...will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it.”

Come on, Jesus! You expect us to go back and tell them that? Maybe we didn’t mention...these are newcomers, guests. And what to do when company comes over? You supposed to be on your best behavior. I can’t tell you what to say, Jesus, but I can tell you what you’re not supposed to do in front of company. You’re not supposed to talk about your own death. And you’re especially not supposed to bring up crucifixion. They just got here - don’t scare them off already!

Jesus, his disciples and “some greeks” are there in the middle of the city of Jerusalem, approaching the commemoration of the Passover, the day when God saved his people by the blood of the lamb... and Jesus just cannot resist any opportunity to bring up his own impending sacrifice. So he just comes right out and says the quiet part out loud there in front of the company and everyone. And remember all these Greeks had said was “We wish to see Jesus.” But there in the shadow of Calvary, Jesus just had to launch into all this about a seed falling to the earth to die, and losing and hating your life. In the immortal words of The Office: “Uh Sir, this is a Wendys.”

Jesus’ response may have seemed off-base, but what he’s doing here is right on-target. He is making sure that anyone who is interested in following him, especially now, as his hour draws near, that they know up front this is what he came to do. This is what they’re going to have to get on board with. “What should I say?” Jesus continues: “Father, deliver me from this hour”? “No, it is for this reason that I have come.”

Jesus is clear: “If they want to see me. They better get ready, cause they’re about to see me...lifted up on the cross.” “They may have seen the fuss people made about me when I got to Jerusalem - everybody waving palm branches and shouting ‘Hosanna!’ But if they’re really interested in what’s going on here, They need to know the truth. If they’re really going to join our mission, they need to understand my glory. “My glory is in this hour of suffering. My mission is my sacrifice. My kingdom is not like this world... My throne will be a cross.”

Here at All Saints, we have just completed the process of setting our vision plan and goals for the next five years. Those goals center around Worship, Welcome, Children/Youth & Community. And when it comes to welcome, we want to find ways to be more intentional about inviting newcomers to visit and join our church family. To be poised and prepared to invite and welcome visitors to join us. What would it look like to reach newcomers to the Mt. Pleasant area who are looking for a church home, or reaching those who have been here but still haven't found that loving community they're looking for...? How do we let them know about all the great things we have going on here at All Saints?

Well, if we take a page out of Jesus’ book, we’ll point directly to the cross. Don’t waste time with niceties; we’ll get straight to the point. Don’t try to impress people with how great our community is, Don’t try to wow them with our music, our aesthetics or our programs. Show them the cross. Show them how we are teaching, modeling and living out the sacrificial love of Christ. If we do it like Jesus, we will jump straight to the part where they see the ways our life shows forth his death. Because if they’re going to be on board with us, and we’re going to be on board with Jesus, then that’s where we have to start. The death of Christ.

On Easter, we will celebrate it as the pathway to the victory Jesus won for us over the power of sin over our lives. But we can’t get to Easter without Good Friday. Without coming to terms with the way Jesus chose to be obedient, to be glorified - on a cross - a form of state-sponsored execution typically reserved for the lowly, the despised and the oppressed. This was the death he chose. This is his glorification. So if we’re going to

gather here, week after week, under the shadow of the cross, we're going to need to make sure that this community is not just about us; it's about those Jesus came to be in solidarity with: the lowly, the despised, the oppressed.

When visitors come and want to see what life here is all about, how will they see us lifting up the lowly, honoring the despised, freeing those entrapped and enslaved by systems of oppression? How will they observe us living in the shadow of the Cross? In the places that nobody goes, nobody talks about, nobody remembers...? Because that's where Jesus is. That's where Jesus has been all this time. While we're busy showing off, that's where Jesus will be, patiently waiting for his followers to finally show up.

I'll admit: this is probably the hardest week of Lent for me. This is the week I always go "Wow, Lent is long. I'm ready for the pomp of Palm Sunday. I'm ready for the joy of Easter." We will make it to Easter. We will make it to the palms, the flowers and the easter eggs. We will finally get to set out the "good china" and admire that freshly-painted window trim. But we're not there yet. We still need to keep our eyes on Calvary. We still need time to ponder his sacrifice. We still need time to draw closer to the cross. This 5th week of lent, Jesus reminds us: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

If we're going to take a page out of Jesus' book, before we show off how well we celebrate the Jesus of Easter Morning (and we do a beautiful job here I will say) we need to show that we know the Jesus of Lent, the sacrificial lamb, the Lord of the lowly, the lover of the unlovable, whose crown is made of thorns and whose throne is the cross. When we follow him there, we will find his heart, the sacred place from which our mission comes.