

“We Wish to See Jesus” John 12: 20-33

It is hard to believe but Lent is fast coming up on its conclusion. Our 40 days of self-examination will soon end, Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter are just days away. It is hard to believe we are practically at Easter.

Yet, there is much to do before then and further personal reflection and examination are called for. In our passage today, we have Greeks coming to see Jesus. It is Passover and they are coming to the feast.

It is generally thought that these Greeks were Jews, Diaspora Jews. In other words, they were exiled Jews banished from their homeland during the Babylonian exile and at other times. They lived in exile in foreign lands.

But they were making the Passover pilgrimage. It was important to re-establish their Judaism and they were returning to Jerusalem, back to their roots. The interesting piece according to verse 21 is they spoke to Philip and said, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus!”

These Jews in foreign lands had heard about this Jesus and they wanted to see him. As a young pastor, I was in a sanctuary once and noticed on the pulpit - - only for the pastor to see - - were the words, “We wish to see Jesus.” I had no clue what the words meant. I had no notion of their significance.

But they were visible only to the person who was preaching. They were a constant reminder to the preacher that these were the marching orders: we wish to see Jesus. Not you. Not your opinion. Not your political position. Not your biased attitudes. Not a sale job. No, we want to see Jesus.

Which is an interesting point not just for the preacher but also for the parishioner. What or who do you wish to see? I have become very interested in why people come to church. Particularly in a pandemic, what motivates us to attend? Why do you tune in? What are you looking for?

Some of us come to be seen; though these days what we wear does not matter.

Some of us come out of habit because that is what you do on Sunday mornings at 10 AM.

Some of us come because we have a part in the service.

Some of us come to hear the latest news or gossip.

Some of us come to spread the latest news or gossip.

Some of us come to hear a rip-roaring sermon.

Some of us come because of the music.

Some of us come so we don't miss anything.

Yet how many of us come to see Jesus? How many of us read today's scripture lessons before we start worship? How many of us prayed

for this worship service before 10 AM? How many of us have a burning desire within us to hear a word from God?

Well, these Greeks, these exiled Jews, came in order to see Jesus. They did not come to see a spectacle or some stem-winding preacher. And we never are told if they really did see Jesus.

It is interesting that the translation “we wish to see Jesus” does not adequately describe their desires. The wording they used was more like “we are desiring to be perceiving Jesus.” They wanted more than a back-stage introduction. They did not desire a photo shoot. They wanted to have a very personal encounter with Jesus. They were up for a life changing experience. They were ready.

I can see how people in exile...people far from their roots...people who have been abandoned would desire a new life. Who were ready for a new encounter. Who wanted the real life experience that helped them become a new person.

Talk about conversion. Repentance. Turning around and going in the opposite direction to where your life was headed. A real make over. A real change.

So, they told Jesus about the desire of these exiled Jews. And Jesus proceeds to tell them what they can expect from an encounter with him. He was very clear in his declaration in verse 25:

He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

A rather strong statement and one that often makes no sense to us.

In trying to describe what he means, Jesus uses an analogy from agriculture. He says, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

One disclaimer about my knowledge of agriculture or horticulture. As a young pastor I was going to have a garden. Living in Southwest Georgia, everyone had a garden. I assumed I would also. I got a clue that chicken manure was really good fertilizer. So I thought if a little is good, a lot is greater. I borrowed a pickup truck and covered my lot with the manure. And grew the best crop of weeks you have ever seen.

So it is hard to understand about a seed dying in order to give life. Yet, I am told that is the way it occurs. You have to bury something so it can germinate, and the fruit or vegetable will have life. Yet, how do we apply that to our lives?

Jesus was declaring that unless we are willing to lose our life, we will not have eternal life. Like with Nicodemus, we can become too literal in interpretation. What he is saying is that if we are not willing to give up life as the world defines life, we will never live.

If we are not willing to turn our backs on all the values of this world, we will not live.

If we are not willing to turn against the practices and patterns of what we call the “good life” in this age, we will never have real life.

He is talking radical approach to life which is not easy and sometimes not possible for us to hear.

I think it is often next to impossible for us to understand and comprehend what Jesus is saying. I also think -- including me -- that Presbyterians have a horrible time translating the meaning of this passage into our lives. We are a privileged lot. We have all we need and more. We spend a great deal of our time defending our status, way of life, and values we think are important.

We are first -- we are not last.

We are masters -- we are not servants.

We are rich -- we are not poor.

We are intelligent -- we are not dumb

We are upper class -- we are not lower class.

When Jesus declares we are to lose our lives, we read it as good press. But doubt we will do it.

Years ago I was dating someone. We had a good relationship and things were going well until I shared a 'bright' idea with her. I had learned of a Presbyterian minister and his wife who had decided to live life in such a way that they were going to give away half of everything they earned. They had committed to living on 50% of their income.

So, I made a proposal to live on 75% of income. That conversation did not last much longer than that one sentence!

But why not? Why not declare that the meaning of life and the purpose of life is really fulfilling the closer we are to Jesus. That Jesus knew the real essence of life. He knew what was real and what was authentic. He knew what was powerful and worth fighting for. He was real life.

So, what would it look like if we began to "die to self" and "lose our life" so we could have eternal life? Well, some ideas:

We would be careful about the clubs or organizations or groups with which we associate. Do they lift up the importance and acceptance of all people or only reserved to certain privileged folks?

We would look at our financial assets to determine where they are invested. And if they are invested in companies that make products that kills via war or cause cancers to our bodies or support unethical practices, we would reconsider those investments.

We would not become involved in schemes to try and get our children into colleges or into certain sports or clubs because of our influence and position like the recent college admission scandals.

We would seriously reconsider some habits we practice -- gambling, drinking, taking financial risks, etc. -- that will negatively affect us and/or our family.

We would take a stand against discrimination of people because of the color of their skin. We would abhor racism of any kind particularly the sad events of this past week in Atlanta where one police officer said the

assailant 'had a bad day' -- while killing 8 people? This one is personal because a Korean woman is in my polity class this spring and has been shaken herself from the tragedy.

We would see where in our lives we could make a difference in someone else's life either through volunteering or through financial support for that cause or that individual.

We would walk through our houses and decide the clutter that has to go and proceed to clean out and donate goods for the welfare of others to have a better life.

We would become involved in assisting the poor and disenfranchised through making our voice and finances heard. We need to work for a 'living wage' for the service industry people in our society.

We would determine what percentage of my assets will go for an effort that will live beyond my life and my family. Just as others before us helped provide a good life for us, do we not have an obligation to the next generation?

Some of my ideas probably cause some of you to roll your eyes. And that is fine. I would be wide open to other suggestions -- of efforts that would go against any norms of our society that are contradictory to the call and will of Christ. And quite simply, anything that does not encourage one to live for God and for others.

That was the message of Christ. That is what it means to 'see' Christ. We are called not to live for ourselves but for God. We are called to wrestle away being self-centered to being God-centered. To be willing to live for God and not for me.

Yet, before I am too harsh sounding and I do not mean against you -- as my sermons are directed more at me most of the time, I do want to say a word of thanks. The South Plains Church surprised itself (and me) with the Souper Bowl Sunday offering. Who would ever had thought of giving over \$2500 for hunger when you had averaged \$200-300 in most years? So, it shows you get it! You can do it! In fact, you did it!

So, what is the result of all this effort of which Jesus speaks? Very simply, when we lose our life, turn away from the ways of this world, then we glorify God. God's name is glorified. God's person is lifted up. We finally are able to do what we are called to do and be: glorifying God with our lives.

That's what it means to see Jesus. Not an idea. Not a philosophy. But a way of life focused on God and God's glory. What are you seeing?