

Fifth Sunday in Lent, 2015

Gospel: John 12:20-33

Sermon: "Do You Want to See Jesus?"

It was years ago. I had arrived at the little country church in the middle of nowhere Pennsylvania. I was running a little late. I had just enough time to pull on a robe and rush up into the pulpit. This was the third church I had preached in that morning. I plunked down my sermon on the surface of the pulpit and tried to catch my breath. And, that's when I saw it – it was a small brass plaque inscribed with these words: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." – John 12:21. The words were visible only to the preacher – to me. And I thought – "Oh Lord. Help me." It was early in my ministry. I was so very concerned about getting everything right. But suddenly I realized it wasn't about me – it was about the yearning of all of us gathered in worship – who simply want to see Jesus.

Today's Gospel reading begins with those same words. It is the time of the Passover. Jesus has entered the city immediately after he raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. Many followed Him. There were those who had witnessed that miracle. There were the curious. There were the scoffers. And, then there were the Greeks. Immediately they find one of the disciples and say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." I wonder what they expected to see. What they got was Jesus – giving a lengthy sermon.

If you wish to see me – Jesus says to us – this is what you will see – this is what you must see. And, the seeing is not going to be easy. So, brace yourselves. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, He invited the disciples to "Come and see. Follow me." Now, he spells out with shocking clarity what seeing – what following – will really mean. Are you sure you really want to see Jesus? Following Jesus has clearly become a matter of life and death. The time is now. The miracles and signs are finished. It is now the slow suffering journey to the cross. In six short days.

Our very human nature screams out – No, I don't want to go. There's got to be a different way – a better plan. Surely, this plan – this stumbling walk to the cross – this can't be it. Jesus – it's a stupid plan! I know you are God and everything – but in this believe me – it's a stupid plan. It's not going to work. No one will believe it. No one will believe in you. No one will follow you.

But Jesus – goes on – making sense of what makes no sense to us. Telling us what it all means before it happens. Do you want to see me? – He asks. This cross – it's not what you expect it to be. It is about God – not you. The cross is not the end. The cross is the beginning. It is only through the cross that we really see Jesus.

But, in many ways we are guilty of sanitizing the cross. We've made it pretty enough to hang out golden chains. We've created impressive works of art in wood and stone of crosses. We have even imprinted our bodies with tattoos of beautiful crosses. We've dressed it up. We've cleaned up what the Roman government used to keep people in line. Disobey and they could hang you from a cross.

One of my favorite authors is Ernest Hemingway. In a short story called, "Today Is Friday," several Roman soldiers are drinking in a bar after a pretty tough Friday afternoon. The conversation goes like this: "Jesus Christ." – one soldier says. "He was pretty good out there," another responds. "Why didn't he come down off the cross?" – the first soldier asks. "He didn't want to come down." the second soldier says. "Show me a guy who doesn't want to come down off a cross," the first soldier says. "I see a lot of them. Any time you show me one that doesn't want to get down off the cross when the time comes, I'll climb right up there with him."

So, are you sure – really sure – you want to see Jesus? And, as he often does, Jesus tells a little story. "See this grain of wheat. It must be placed in the ground – in the dirt and buried – in order to grow. Only then will there be a plentiful harvest." And then he says to us – His followers – "This is how it is. Those who love their lives, maintain the status quo, protect and conserve what they have – ultimately they will lose out. You must give up all that – you must die – in order to live. It's the only way."

Dying to self is such a radical counter-cultural idea. We are sure we can't do it. Our world values tell us repeatedly... Live for yourself. Don't worry – be happy. It is easy for us to become paralyzed in our own self-centeredness.

We are in the final week of Lent – a time for reflection, a time for recommitment, a time for repentance. I think one of the things for which we all need repentance is our rampant consumerism as a nation. It is disturbing to me that the marketing technique for the School of Mines is to proclaim that graduates will make more

money than those who go to the less well known Harvard University. We have somehow equated more money with more happiness. It perpetuates a world of winners and losers.

And then there is a large decluttering movement at this time of year – called 40 bags in 40 days. It is sort of a take on the 40 days of Lent. Their Facebook page has close to 20,000 members. It only takes a few moments of reading posts to realize that people are weighed down – crushed – by their “stuff”. They are dying from all they were convinced would bring them joy. They are paralyzed about what to do with “stuff” they have saved for decades. None of it is lifegiving. We are all dying here.

And Jesus says – Give it up. Give it all up. You will only find life – through me. Do you really want to see Jesus? You will see Jesus often in the unexpected. You will see Him in the faces of the homeless and the hungry. You will see Jesus in the faces of the suffering and the dying. You will see Jesus in the faces of the people sitting in prison cells.

Maybe a short simple way to paraphrase what Jesus is saying in this lengthy sermon is this: “If you want to see me, first look down into the dirt; then look up to the cross.”

We worship so that we can see Jesus. We are the body of Christ. It is through regular worship that the light of Christ can shine through us so that others can see it. Do you wish to see Jesus? Do you yearn for God’s presence in your life? You won’t get what you expect. You may have come to this place to hear the beautiful Bible stories of your childhood. You may have come here to heal from a sorrow or loss in your life. You may have wandered in here not even knowing what you are seeking. Jesus has promised to draw all people to Him. Wherever you are going, God promises to go with you.

Do you wish to see Jesus? We are on the last leg of our Lenten journey to the cross. Together we will see life on the other side of the cross. And then when we are standing at the empty tomb, we can tell everyone: “Yes, I have seen Jesus!”