March 18, 2018

John 12:20-33

In the Wilderness: Jesus

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 12:20-33 New Revised Standard Version

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.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” I love these Greeks who wish to see Jesus. They don’t come to Philip asking for information about Jesus. They don’t ask to read a book about him or learn about him. They wish to see Jesus. Person to person, face to face. All of us wish to see Jesus. We came to church this morning looking for Jesus, looking for help, looking for a word, an idea, a hymn, a prayer, words that would help us make sense of the world. We all wish to see Jesus. The scripture passage doesn’t tell us if the Greeks were able to see Jesus.

The Greeks approach Philip whose name is distinctively Greek. Philip seeks out Andrew whose name is also distinctively Greek and then both Philip and Andrew tell Jesus there are some Greeks looking for you. Isn’t that how we all work? We have a question or a problem, so we try to find someone who looks like us, someone that we have something in common with, someone that has our same gender or grew up in the same area that we did. We seek out people that are like us. They seem more approachable. We don’t know how the story ends for the Greeks. We don’t hear anything more about them.

Jesus responds to Philip and Andrew with a story about a grain of wheat remaining a single grain, unless it falls into the earth and dies. Only if it dies does it produce much fruit. Then Jesus talks about those who love their lives, those who maintain the status quo, those who protect and conserve their lives, they will lose their lives. But those who hate their lives, in Matthew and Luke Jesus says those who lose their lives for my sake, will find them, they will have eternal life, real life, full life. If you want to live, really live, you have to learn to give your life away, you have to learn how to die. This is the Jesus of the cross. It is an obedient embrace of sacrificial love to the point of death.

For centuries this Sunday, the fifth in Lent, was known as Passion Sunday, the day when Christian people were invited to pay particular attention to the central symbol of the Christian faith, the cross. This is not always easy. I want to focus more on alive, radical Jesus. I like radical Jesus. Jesus who preferred the company of the lonely and the despised. Jesus who crossed lines of ritual impurity to deal with the unclean, the lepers, the possessed, the mentally ill, the prostitutes and adulterers. Jesus who not only favored the homeless, he was himself homeless.

Jesus challenged everybody, every established institution, including his own religion. Instead of protecting himself and guaranteeing his future security, he seemed intentionally to make himself vulnerable. Instead of building his resume, bank account, and social standing, he seemed focused on the present. Instead of teaching how to get ahead, Jesus talked about a single grain dying in order to bear much fruit. Instead of teaching how to be successful, Jesus said “Those who love their life, lose it.” And then Jesus walked directly into danger, to his death, and died. Jesus laid down his own life.

You can’t have Christianity without the cross. Will Willimon is a prolific author and retired United Methodist Bishop who tells about when his first Methodist church decided to put a rough wood cross on the church lawn for Lent. The neighborhood complained. They said it was too depressing. Willimon says that when he thinks about the people who line up to crowd into church on Easter, he has always been tempted to put a sign out front during Holy Week: “No one gets in Sunday who wasn’t here Friday.”

We don’t want to hear about the suffering. And then we hear Jesus’ words, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book *The Last Week,* talk about crucifixion as a form of Roman imperial terrorism. Rome had occupied Israel for decades and crucifixion was reserved for special victims, runaway slaves, or rebel insurgents who subverted Roman law and order and disturbed the Pax Romana. As a deterrent, crucifixion was always as public as possible. Even though the Jews have been frequently blamed for Jesus’ death, they didn’t have authority to execute anyone. Only the Romans could. In fact, Jews were frequent victims in crucifixion.

Borg and Crossan doubt that the Jewish authorities even convinced the Romans to crucify Jesus. All Jews, even those who were cooperating and collaborating with the Romans, were afraid of crucifixion and appalled by it. Every time a Jew was crucified, it was a public humiliation for all Jews. It was a reminder of their subjugation to Roman occupation. It said loud and clear that the Romans were in charge and that everyone was their property and they could do whatever they liked with you.

Borg and Crossan say that the Romans crucified Jesus because they regarded him as a threat to Roman authority and power. Jesus didn’t advocate overthrowing the state, but he challenged the authorities by claiming that their power to enforce and coerce, intimidate and imprison, torture and crucify, was nothing. Jesus said that the real power in this world is the power of love. Jesus was passionate about God and God’s justice, and that love can overcome anything, even the power of death. That’s why the day Jesus is crucified is Good Friday.

Jesus says to gain your life, to live your life fully, is to give it away, in love, for Jesus’ sake. That is the message and meaning of the cross. The Christian life is always about giving, serving, and loving others. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Jesus’ death made God’s love visible. The cross shows us that love is more powerful than hate and life is more powerful than death. We take up that cross and carry it with courage and conviction.

We follow Jesus so that we might be drawn more deeply into the kingdom of God through our love for, our service to, and our sacrifice on behalf of others around us. Jesus shows us God’s strength through vulnerability, God’s power through what appears weak in the world, and God’s justice through love, mercy, and forgiveness. And we are called to follow Jesus in that same kind of life and love.

I met a new friend last week who said that although he had grown up in the church, in high school he left because he was tired of people in the church. He was tired of people gossiping, and being mean to one another in the church. When he shared that with me, I thought of that old saying that a church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints. My new friend said that he came back to church because of Jesus. He couldn’t leave Jesus, and he was drawn to Jesus. He said he was drawn to Jesus like a magnet. Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” We are drawn here today and we wish to see Jesus. Jesus is here and Jesus draws us to him. Thanks be to God. Amen.