

© John H. Young, 2024. This sermon may be reproduced, in part or in whole, and by any means, for personal use, group study, or similar non-commercial purposes without charge or further permission. Credit should be given for group use. Commercial reproduction and distribution are prohibited except with the written permission of John H. Young.

Bridge Street United Church
March 17, 2024
Rev. Dr. John H. Young
Readings Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16; John 12:20-33

Journeying Through Lent: Seeing Jesus

Today's Gospel reading is a bit of a puzzling story. At least I find it so. It begins with some "Greeks" wanting to see Jesus. "Greeks" here may be Gentiles (that is, non-Jews), or the term may refer to Greek-speaking Jews who have come to Jerusalem for Passover. Either way, they have likely come from some other part of the Mediterranean world. They want to see Jesus. But then Jesus seems to address Philip and Andrew rather than the nameless Greeks, and he speaks about what following him means and about how he understands his impending death. When I read the story, I find myself wondering what happened to the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus. So, what might we make of this story?

I want to start with two observations. First, John's Gospel is carefully crafted, carefully crafted. At the end of chapter 20, the writer notes: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." The writer is clear. From all the things he knows about Jesus's life and teachings, he selects the stories, the teachings, the events he thinks are most likely to convince those for whom he wrote his gospel initially, and us now, to believe that Jesus was the Son of God and, as he notes, to have life in his name.

A second observation—today’s reading comes at a crucial junction point in Jesus’ ministry and in John’s Gospel. Context is always important. This passage is preceded by Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the event we think about and celebrate on Palm Sunday. This passage is followed by a lengthy section in John’s gospel, chapters 13-17, called Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, a section in which Jesus seeks to prepare his disciples for his crucifixion and therefore his absence from them. So, this passage, which begins with Greeks coming to two of Jesus’ disciples—Andrew and Peter—and telling these two disciples that they want to see Jesus, represents in John’s Gospel the end of Jesus’ ministry and a transition to that Farewell Discourse and the subsequent events of Jesus’ arrest, death, and resurrection.

So, what might we make of this passage? I think that the writer of John’s Gospel thought it was not only the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus. By “seeing,” he meant knowing or knowing better. I think he believed that the community for whom he wrote also wanted to see Jesus, to know Jesus better. I think those closing verses of chapter 20 that I quoted a little earlier suggest that. After all, he was clear that he had selected from all he knew about Jesus those teachings and events that he thought most likely to lead people to share his conviction about who Jesus was. That said, I also think he believed he was writing not only for the community with whom this gospel was first shared, probably the Christian community in Ephesus, but also for other Christian communities who might someday read this gospel.

I think we also gather here as those who wish to see Jesus, that is, to know better this figure who stands at the centre of the Christian tradition. I have several good friends who are Jewish and likewise several close friends who are Muslim. I have great respect for their religious traditions and their practice of them, as they do for me and my practice of Christianity. I believe that those two religions are as valid a pathway to a right relationship with God as Christianity,

even though those religions are not my path. I am clear that what distinguishes me from my friends is the place I give to Jesus in my religion, something, of course, that they do not in their practices of Judaism and Islam respectively, though they all see Jesus as a great figure.

But we gather here, I think, because, among other things, we want to know more about our religious tradition and about the figure who stands at the centre of it. Two of the persons at whose reflections about this passage I read in preparation for this sermon commented that when they were in theological school, there was either a sign or a plaque on the pulpit in the chapel of their theological school. It was a sign or a plaque visible only to the person preaching, but it was clearly visible to the preacher. It read: “We wish to see Jesus,” quoting from today’s reading from John’s Gospel, of course, but reminding the preacher of why she or he or they were standing in that place. And these two writers went to different theological schools.

My theological school did not have such a phrase carved into the pulpit or otherwise visible. But it is a good reminder for preachers of what those who gather in worship hope for and of why we gather.

In John’s Gospel, this story takes place at the height of Jesus’ popularity. Only a little before his triumphal entry, he had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. That event expanded his fame. So, as he approached Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Passover, and then entered it in that triumphal entry we celebrate on Palm Sunday, crowds gathered. There was adulation from some and increased curiosity from others. Some of the Jewish religious leaders feared that the Romans, who governed and who were always wary about the possibility of an insurrection led by any individual who seemed to have great popular support, might become concerned about Jesus, given the popular support he appeared to have. These religious leaders feared that support might lead the Romans to crack down on the practice of Judaism. In the verse immediately preceding

today's gospel lesson, they said to one another "Look, the whole world has gone after him." So, it is not surprising that "the Greeks," whether they were Greek-speaking Jews or Gentiles attracted to Judaism, were curious about this figure Jesus.

But Jesus' response, made to Andrew and Philip who have brought this news, talks about what following him means. This is where he speaks about the way in which a grain of wheat, if it is put into the ground, dies, but in dying it produces much fruit. Jesus then goes on to say that "those who love their life lose it, and those who hate ("reject" would be a more accurate term than "hate") their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." These words sound a lot like words found in the other three gospels where Jesus said that "those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it." But I think that the illustration of the grain of wheat, that remains but a single grain of wheat if it is kept but bears much fruit if it is planted and dies, takes this passage in a somewhat different direction from the other three.

I am a gardener. Many of you here either are or have been. I do not grow wheat in our vegetable garden, but I do know that the head, or ear, of a stalk of wheat produced from a single seed or grain of wheat contains many grains or seeds. To name something Caroline and I do grow in our garden, and something many of you would be familiar with, think of the number of tomatoes one gets from a single tomato plant, a plant that has originated in a single seed.

I think that with this analogy Jesus is speaking about how we use or spend our lives. Do we try to hoard them, to live only for ourselves, or are we willing to follow this Jesus, to spend our lives in a way other than our own? Do the things we do, do the decisions we make, reflect God's grace and God's love, a grace and a love we have received, a grace and a love we want to

extend to others? Certainly in doing so, we not only follow but we also witness to this one who stands at the centre of our tradition.

In thinking about this passage, and the request of the Greeks to see Jesus, there is another angle that occurred to me as I was working on this sermon. Their request was an understandable one. Jesus had become popular. They had heard about him. They were curious about him. And so they approached several of his followers, seeing Philip and Andrew as a route to seeing him, to learning more about him.

I realized, as I was working on this sermon, that each of us can be the means through which someone else sees Jesus. Indeed, it is not only that we can be; sometimes we are. It is not a new concept, but it struck me anew this past week. As I read that passage about the single grain of wheat dying and bearing much fruit, I was reminded of a shaping event in my own life. As every minister should be, I want to be careful about using myself or things in my life as illustrations for sermons. But sometimes, an experience I, or any of us, have had can be useful.

In the early 1980s, while I was working on my Ph.D. I was at a conference where I heard a thoughtful lecture by a then young Jesuit scholar named Michael Czerny. I was deeply impressed. I next heard of him in 1989. In that year, and you may remember this event, six Jesuits scholars working and teaching at the University of Central America in San Salvador were murdered, along with their cook and the cook's daughter. El Salvador at that time was in the midst of a civil war. The government and its armed forces suspected that the Jesuits, in their work with the poor of the country and with their advocacy of negotiations with the guerilla movement, were subversives and therefore a threat. Bishop Oscar Romero, who had been murdered earlier, was a victim of similar thinking. The Jesuit order invited members of the order who had the necessary language and other skill sets, and who felt moved to do so, to volunteer to

replace the murdered members of the order at the University of Central America. Father Michael Czerny was one of the volunteers. So, shortly after these murders took place, he headed to the University of Central America to become the Director of the University's Institute for Human Rights and also Vice-Rector for Social Outreach. The previous Director of the Institute for Human Rights had been one of the murdered priests.

At that time I was in congregational ministry. Not long before, I had completed my Ph.D. I was much enjoying congregational ministry, but I also had the hope that I might someday teach. Here was someone I knew, not well but knew, who had given up a tenured teaching position to go to a place where there was considerable likelihood he would meet the fate of the person he was replacing. El Salvador in the late 1980s and the early 1990s was a risky place to be an advocate for the poor or for Human Rights, and perhaps especially if you were a Jesuit. I thought a lot about his decision. He was giving up, freely, something that I certainly wanted to do. At that time, the odds of getting a teaching position in a theological school were pretty low, given the relatively few teaching positions in theological schools and the much greater number of persons with the requisite qualifications. I wondered: "What would lead someone to give that up that thing I wanted, to go to a place where your life was in danger, day in and day out?" I knew the answer, at least I knew it in my head. But Czerny's example made me think, think from a different angle, think in a different way about life, and service, and what following Jesus could mean. I think his example helped me to see Jesus, certainly to see following Jesus, with a greater depth than I had seen it before.

I share this story because I think we, too, each one of us, can be the means for someone else, and maybe more than just one someone else, to see Jesus. What we say and what we do in this place, in worship here week by week, is important. It can strengthen us, provide us new

insights, and deepen our commitment. It can give us the words and the concepts we need to respond to the person who asks us about our faith, about what motivates us to follow, about what leads us to make sometimes costly decisions. But how we live is, as much as the words we say, a way in which we witness to Jesus, witness to the love and the grace of God that we see in his life, his teachings, his death, and his resurrection.

May we indeed see Jesus. And may we be a means for others to do the same. And to the God who made us, to the one through whom we have seen that God most fully revealed, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*. The Anchor Bible. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966.

Heath, E. Carrington. "March 17: Fourth Sunday in Lent." *The Christian Century*, March 2004, p. 26.

Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-1220-33-6>