

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent John 12. 20-33 PRLC 3.17.24 Pr. Al Berg

“Grace and Peace to you from God our Creator, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the promise of the H.S.”

When I first read this morning’s Gospel lesson to prepare for this sermon— I thought of an old and familiar phrase— *“Be careful what you wish for.”* I remembered that was the phrase my mom would use whenever I spouted-off some youthful exuberance like: *“Boy, I wish I could be like that person!* Or— maybe another one like *“I wish... I could do that!”* And by her gentle response and reminder she would try— to bring me back down to earth. To encourage me to think about the implications of what I had just wished for... My mom was wise in that way.

*“Be careful what you wish for.”* That’s the first thing that pops into my mind when I read this passage from John’s Gospel about some Greeks who seem to show up out of nowhere. *They wanted to see Jesus. They wanted to meet Jesus.* They had arrived during the Jewish celebration of the *“Passover”* ... which is the setting here in John’s Gospel surrounding the events of what we call *“Palm Sunday”* ... remember that unusual entrance into Jerusalem with Jesus riding in on a donkey... *strange entrance* for a so-called king... **don’t you think?** This morning’s passage finds Jesus gathered with his disciples and many others... including some Greeks. These Greeks would have been considered *“foreigners”*— *“gentiles”* who had arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. And that is where they seek out one of Jesus disciples and ask their question— *“Sir, we wish to see Jesus...”*

Maybe they’re curious? Maybe they’re skeptical? Maybe they’re just considering becoming Jesus followers, or they need some healing— we don’t really know what they’re up to— *or* exactly what they are looking for in Jesus. This narrative really doesn’t tell us.

All we know is that they want to see him, *presumably* because they’ve heard good things. But one thing for certain— these Greeks, these *“Gentiles”*— along with Jesus’ disciples and everyone else within earshot... **(and that includes us!)**— will get a whole lot more than we probably expected— or bargained for— when Jesus reveals what it means to follow him in this Gospel reading.

When Jesus finally does speak, he begins with a metaphor...(wouldn’t you guess!) *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain of wheat... But... if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* Obviously, he’s offering more than just “gardening advice” — he’s talking about his own death... So, maybe, what he’s saying doesn’t sound *so good* after all?— when you get beyond all the *imagery*... and the *analogy*... and the *metaphor* of it!

Jesus knew this trip to Jerusalem was going to be different. The festival of the Jewish Passover celebrated the *“release”* of the Jewish slaves and Moses from Egypt **(some 1,500 yrs. before)** ... kind of a **“4<sup>th</sup> of July”** celebration for Jews. But Jesus knew it was going to be a whole lot more than just a party that the locals were looking forward to— and it was certainly going to include more than just Jews. It was going to mark a whole new kind of release, a whole **new kind** of *deliverance* and *freedom*— and this time— for all— for everyone! For a whole world trapped in bondage!

Jesus knows **he’s** that grain of wheat! And Jesus is about to die, be crucified on a cross and be buried... and something very unexpected would happen from his death. **Jesus is** the Messiah, the *“Beloved Son of God,”* and he would accomplish what we could never accomplish by ourselves. He’ll accomplish it all by an act of God-given *grace* and *love* and *sacrifice* and *forgiveness*— for the sake of the world.

But there's more to this story— if we listen to the rest of what Jesus predicts and promises about his own death...He also says: *“Whoever serves me must follow me, that where I am, there my servant will be also.”* (Pause)

*“Whoever serves me— follows me?” ... “That where I am, there my servant will be also?”* If serving Jesus means following him to the cross, how badly do we want that job? If Jesus plans to die on a Cross on a hill called Golgotha— is that where I will meet him? In some kind of sacrificial death of my own? Is this what I bargained for when I prayed about trying to be a better disciple? About trying to live more faithfully? About trying to do God's will?

***“Be careful what you wish for!”*** Right? And then Jesus delivers “a kicker”— it's a “kicker” because of the way he says it: *“Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”* Vs.25 In the category of “hard sayings” this one probably tops on the list!! How are we to interpret Jesus *intentional* hyperbole in this verse? Jesus did not seem to “hate” his life in this world. And yet, Jesus here says we are to “hate” our lives lived “*in this world*,” (in other words), in the world we live in— a fallen, messed-up, other-hurting, self-seeking, rebellious world. I have come to appreciate Frederick Dale Bruner's understanding and translation of this verse. **Bruner says—** *“If one hates the way life is lived in this world... it refers to it's consummately selfish way and in our own culpable involvement in that way... then one will reject it, by living Christ's counter-cultural way, and preserve one's life into a deep and lasting life.”* **Be careful what you wish for!**

I wonder if this is what those Greeks thought about when they asked to see Jesus. You see, I imagine what drew people to Jesus *back in the day* is very much like what draws people to Jesus now. And, truth be told, what has drawn people to Jesus over the ages hasn't always been what God has had in mind for us. So much of the time, then as now, it seems — what draws folks to Jesus are all the miracles and healings, or his casting out of demons...or his water-walking... or maybe it's his powerful preaching, and/or his clever teachings — In other words, what draws people to Jesus much of time **may go no further** than just the sentiment of Christmas and/or an emotional glow felt on Easter morning... you know— A precious little baby in a manger... with all those chubby little angels and candles and silent, holy nights; **or**— the empty tomb, with a large slightly tilted and rugged empty cross, all decked out with fragrant and overflowing white flowers... and, of course, the stirring Alleluia Chorus ringing in our ears!

But what Jesus promises today in our Gospel— for all those wannabe followers — is that things are going to get tough for followers. There is no “cheap grace” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer was wont to say... What cost God in Christ will cost those who follow... it's implied by what Bonhoeffer meant when he shared these words— *“If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into (just an) emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural (think ‘this worldly’ here folks!) pause and a Christ-like existence— we have lost sight of the One we are to follow.”* (*Cost of Discipleship, pg.98*)

Jesus says— *“the hour has come... to be glorified,”* (vs.23) but you and I and the Gospel writer John knows that by being “glorified”— Jesus means being “crucified on a cross” And it will mean torture and bloody beatings, thorns and nails... it will mean betrayal, denial, and abandonment. It will mean despair and darkness and dying. And it certainly doesn't sound like a “bed of roses” for you and me as well, if we are to follow... ***“Be careful what you ask for...”***

To be sure, I'm not saying that we are signing up for personal crucifixions... But we are called into **something**, and it isn't always going to be *easy-peasy*... or *comfortable* or *convenient*, or some other "*vision of glory*" that we may have conjured up for ourselves— For we know where this story is going to end up for Jesus... and we should also be wondering about what Jesus very direct words mean for us— for they **are** addressed to each and everyone of us...make no mistake! When Jesus, quite clearly, says: "*Whoever serves me, follows me... and where I am, there my servant will be also.*" "Be careful what you wish for!" dear friends!

Pay heed! Listen! When we serve and follow Jesus, **we will** give up something, when we do without for the sake of others. It's called "cross-bearing" ... When we *deny*, or *die* to our *pride*, our own *security*, or to our own *popularity*— just like Jesus did! When we make our ourselves *small*— so that God's will and ways are made *big* and *glorified*.

When we serve and follow Jesus— when we welcome the stranger, when we forgive those whom, the "*world*" will not— just like Jesus did!

When we serve and follow Jesus by standing up for and defending the rights of others who are suffering, even when that means risking something of ourselves— just like Jesus did!

When we serve and follow Jesus and proclaim a *love* and a *grace* and a *mercy* so big— that it is an affront to the ways of this world— just like Jesus did!

So, yeah, let's be careful about **what we wish for** when it comes to following Jesus. And let's be bold and faithful and courageous about it as well. Even if it means looking like "*fools for Christ's sake.*" Let's let God's forgiveness lead **us** to forgive in a *new way*... a *Spirit-inspired* way. Let's let God's abundant grace grow **our** faith in God. Let's let the generosity of God move *us* to be more generous— Let's let the *sacrifice* of God, in Jesus, inspire our own *sacrificial* living.

We love because he loves first. We love because the cross draws us toward love— a "*suffering love*" And its power is as compelling as it is wondrous and mysterious. For the cross pulls us toward God and toward each other. Whether we want to see Jesus or not, here his is, drawing you and me together... Calling us in grace and forgiveness to follow and leading us to the "*new life*" he has promised for *us*, and for *all others*— on this side of the grave and beyond.

"i Jesu Nav" (Norwegian: "In Jesus Name")— Amen"