

The Desire to See
Jeremiah 31:31-34 & John 12:20-33

Fifth Sunday in Lent/ 17th March 2024

“We wish to see Jesus.” I see these words every time I step into this pulpit. Not in my imagination. I really see them. Because they’re right here, etched into the edge of the pulpit: “Sir, we would see Jesus.” The King James rendering of John 20:21. *Would* or *wish*, both words express the desire, the yearning to meet, to see Jesus.

We don’t know much about these “Greeks,” as John describes them. We know something. They’re in Jerusalem. They’re part of a group that “went up,” John says, to the Temple Mount, the temple of Yahweh, “to worship.” They were there for a “festival,” meaning Passover. These are people who worshipped Yahweh, the God of Israel. But were they Jews? Possibly. They might have been Hellenistic Jews from the Greek-speaking world (perhaps from modern day Greece or Turkey). They might have been pilgrims, making a once-in-a-lifetime journey to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. Or, they could have been religious seekers, Gentiles who worshipped Yahweh, devoted to the God of Israel, but never became Jews. They would have been allowed to worship God in the Court of the Gentiles, one of the outer courtyards of the Temple, but no closer. Either way—they’re religious seekers there to worship.

We don’t know how they came to know about Jesus. We don’t know why they’re seeking after him. We don’t know what they find attractive about Jesus’ message or what drew them to him. They’re eager to meet him. We can say that their desire to worship Yahweh along with a kind of holy curiosity, draws them to Jesus. Their journey toward Jesus traverses *through* worship, adoration, and praise. It’s on the way toward the worship of the God of Israel that they seek out Philip, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew, and then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered “them,” the text says—presumably Philip and Andrew—but Jesus never does speak directly to the Greeks.

And the answer to “them,” you have to admit, is a bit odd. It’s the non-sequitur of all non-sequiturs. “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.” Yes, talk about *non-sequiturs*! It must have been baffling for them. Hearing that “some Greeks” want to meet him, Jesus launches into this mini sermon.

From our vantage, on this side of the cross, we know that Jesus is talking about his impending death and the meaning of his death. Because the implied reference is to the cross, a lot of ink has been spent and spilled over the centuries trying to make sense of these verses—and, for the most part, ignoring the occasion and *setting* of Jesus’ statement, the inquiry of Greeks on their way to worship Yahweh.

The Church has come up with all kinds of theories regarding the meaning of the cross, the crucifixion, what theologians call theories of atonement. The most pervasive theory in Western theology, running from Ambrose of Milan (399-397) to Anselm of Canterbury (c.1003-1109) right up to Mel of Hollywood (although I shouldn't place Mel Gibson in the company of Ambrose and Anselm. Gibson is a terrible theologian, and *The Passion of Christ* was not a great movie)—the most pervasive theory, the theory of substitutionary atonement claims that “God demands death in order for life to emerge, that only a violent sacrifice of a perfect and sinless Jesus could appease a God whose honor has been affronted and whose anger has been aroused.”¹ This is the dominant view in the Church. But there are other, older views.² Countless Christians over the years—including today—and many non-Christians believe that “God is basically an angry Father who demands sacrifice in order to balance the injustice of the universe caused by human sin.”³ This view of the cross has also pushed many people away from Christianity. Contemporary theologian Michael Welker says this view is “nothing less than destructive of faith.” It has “propagated a latent image of God that is deeply unchristian, indeed demonic: This God is always seeking compensation.”⁴ This view is so ingrained into the Christian psyche that when we hear a text like this, of falling and dying, of a death required, we listen to it with sacrifice in mind.

This verse is problematic because it's so easy to think that a follower of Jesus must despise this world and that we are to hate our lives within it. What is Jesus really saying? What does it really mean to hate one's life? What does it mean to die to self? How does one lose one's soul? These are tough questions. A misreading of this text has done considerable damage. What is left if one's soul or self (the Greek here is *psyche*) is lost? Does Christ become everything, and we become nothing? Is this what it means to be a Christian, to lose one's individuality or personality? I've met a lot of Christians over the years who are trying to become nothing, to remove anything that smacks of self so that Christ can become everything in them. This isn't healthy. Imagine how such an interpretation sounds to someone who's been emotionally or physically abused, their trauma belittled, their soul diminished or broken, someone who has a poor sense of self, who was taught from an early age that they don't matter. What about those who have struggled really hard to find, regain, or reclaim their souls after being told or thinking that they don't matter, brave, courageous people who have learned to care for their souls, love, honor, and respect themselves? What do they do with these words? Hearing Jesus say one must “hate their life” is not good news! In fact, it's really bad news, terrible news.

Surely, Jesus knows that such a reading of this text is terrible news. I can't imagine that Jesus, teaching in *love*, would have meant for us to read or hear the text this way! There must be a still more excellent way.

Contemporary writer Barbara Brown Taylor offers a beautiful, faithful framing of the text that captures the deep wisdom that Jesus wants us to know. “What [Jesus] is telling us,” she says, “is that if we do everything in our power to protect our lives as they are—if we successfully prevent change, prevent conflict, prevent pain—then at the end we will find that we had no life at all. But if we hate our lives in this world, which as far as I am concerned can only mean if we hate all the ways we cheapen our lives by chasing comfort, safety, and superiority in this world – if we hate that enough to stop it and start chasing God instead – then there will be no end to the

abundance of our lives.”⁵ This shift, this transition from one way to a new way that Taylor describes, this dying and rising that Jesus is pointing to—both are motivated by love.

This is why I think we must hear these verses in John 12 about dying and rising within the larger setting of the text that begins with “some Greeks” making their way into worship with a desire, a passion, and a love for God. It is love that drives them to want to *see Jesus*. If my reading is correct, we discover that there is a knowledge of God, a type of insight, awareness, and perception of God that can *only* be found by following the desires of the heart, through devotion, adoration—doxology. It’s a knowledge of God that can’t be achieved by our intellect or by living a good life. There are things about God that we discover only in and through worship rooted and grounded in love and not apart from it. And love is required to meet Jesus and to hear Jesus, and love is required for us to see what he’s about to do on a cross.⁶

It’s the context of love—drawn by the love of God, called by the love of God, claimed and affirmed to the core of our being by the power of God’s love – that allows us to see Jesus, to see the God who shines through the face of Jesus, the one who comes in love to liberate us from all that hinders love, which is what John means by “the world.” The “world” refers to everything that is against God’s desires for us and creation. But even the “judgment of the world” that Jesus says is about to occur on the cross, which is a judgment against all that is against God’s love in our lives, even this judgment is in service to love. “For God sent the son...not to condemn the world,” as we learn in John’s Gospel, “but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn. 3:17). God’s desire is not to destroy life, but to give life, abundantly. Dying, rising, bearing fruit—all in love. And only in John do we hear these words: “I have come,” Jesus said, “that they might have life and have it in abundance” (Jn. 10:10). Life! And when “I am lifted up, I will draw all peoples to myself” (Jn. 12:23). It’s all done in love.

Several years ago, I came across the words of poet Kathleen Raine (1909-2003). I turn to them often; they are simple yet so profound. Raine was born in Scotland, she was a child of the manse, and spent most of her life in England. She was a gifted poet and scholar known for her work on William Blake (1757-1827). Raine said, “Unless you see a thing in the light of love, you do not see a thing at all.”⁷ It’s worth our time praying and meditating on this insight, this truth. *Unless you see in the light of love you do not see at all.* The opposite is also true: without the light of love, we don’t see a thing, we don’t see. Without the light of love it’s difficult to see this Jesus that we want to see.

The Greeks said, “We wish to see Jesus.” Do we wish to see Jesus? What does your heart say? Will you allow your heart to lead you there, to lead the way to him. Love will lead the way to him—how can it not? Love will allow us to see. Love will enable us to serve and follow him in his way of suffering love. Within the arms of God’s love, we discover that something in us needs to die. Within the arms of love, we discover that we are free to let it die, to let it go, to give up. In the arms of love we are free even to die to the things that separate us from that love. Within the arms of God’s love—that’s where we discover the shift and something opens up for us, a way to finally meet him. The change, the shift, doesn’t occur through fear, only *love*. Little good is gained through living a life of fear. Fear doesn’t motivate us for this kind of change. But love does. And through love, we become children of light (John 12:33).

Long ago, Saint Augustine (354-430) prayed, “Give me the strength to seek you, oh, you who allowed me to find you, and who gave me the hope of finding you more and more.”⁸ If we modified this a little we might pray, “Give me the love to seek you, oh, you who allowed me to find you, and who gave me the hope of finding you more and more.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ I’m grateful for Thomas G. Long’s succinct summary of substitutionary atonement theory “What God Wants,” *Christian Century* (March 21, 2006), 19.

² For a good overview of these theories see Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2003). The oldest theory of atonement is known as *Christus Victor*. See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (1913).

³ Long, 19.

⁴ Welker cited in Long, 19.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Unless a Grain Falls” in Ronald Allen, ed. *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). The sermon text may be found here:

<https://atriversedge.wordpress.com/2013/03/17/unless-a-grain-falls/>.

⁶ Kenneth E. Kovacs, Theological Themes for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, *Lectionary Homiletics*, XXIII (No. 2, February/ March 2012), 58.

⁷ Cited in John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (HarperCollins, 1989), 65.

⁸ Augustine, *The Trinity* (XV, 28, 51).