

The lens of the cross
March 21, 2021
Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B
John 12: 20-33

We have reached the fifth Sunday in Lent. We are coming closer and closer to the cross. And in the readings, Jesus clearly has his eyes fixed there. At this point in Lent, the cross is the lens through which we view everything.

John Calvin said that the Bible is like eyeglasses that allow us to see God. Without the “spectacles of Scripture,” we are like a person with blurry vision, unable to see God. Scripture was the lens through which Calvin viewed everything. Right now in Lent our lenses are the cross. It seems, in the gospel passage for today, that Jesus is there too. Wherever he looks, he sees the cross.

John shows us Jesus looking into the future, talking about the kind of death he will die. He has a certainty about his future that we will never have. But that’s the difference between us and God I guess.

In one of her Instagram videos last week, Kate Bowler talked about forfeiting the desire to reach into the future, and drag it, kicking and screaming, into the present. We have to let go of our demands to know what is happening and what will come. Living in this liminality, in this uncertainty, doesn’t come naturally to us. That is part of why this year has been so so hard. Because we are living every second of every day in a space that is unstable and uncertain.

And so, I totally agree with the Greeks. I want to see Jesus. We would all love that right? Some proof that God’s love is real despite all the pain of the world. But we don’t have Andrew or Phillip to take our hands and lead us to Jesus. We have to take it on faith that Jesus is with us.

But sometimes that feels impossible. How do we believe in the power of God’s love to conquer all when someone who has “just had a bad day,” can walk into a business and take his bad day out on innocent people? How do we believe in the power of God’s love when someone we love gets a diagnosis that breaks our heart? How do we believe in the power of love when the shadow of addiction threatens to stamp out the light?

When those Greeks ask to see Jesus, they might not get what they were thinking or hoping. Instead of perhaps a miracle or a healing or a soothing word, Jesus tell them not only that he will die, but that they have to lose their lives as well.

Jesus tells his disciples that “the hour has come.” It’s the moment that his whole life has been leading up to, the hour in which he is to be glorified. It’s clear that he wants his disciples to understand what he means, but before he explains himself he offers them a confusing proverb... that grains of wheat must, in a sense, die to what they are if they are to bear fruit. And so it is that we humans must die to our love of power, importance and greatness. We must die to the desire for our own supremacy, and then we can bear the fruit of justice.

This hour of which Jesus speaks sounds like a cautionary and foreboding tale, a tale of destruction and loss. Even though we know that the cross ends in alleluia, in resurrection, the ones hearing Jesus right now do not know that. As that hour comes, Jesus says that his very soul is troubled and yet he will not ask for the hour, for the cross, to be taken away from him, for it is the purpose of his life on earth.

So why did Jesus go through this time? Why did he go to the cross? Even though he feared it, even though his soul was troubled, still he didn’t ask God to save him from it, for he knew all along that he had come to earth to be in solidarity with humanity, because God so loves us.

Throughout the centuries, theologians, preachers, leaders, readers of the Bible have tried to understand the cross and what it means for God’s son to suffer so much.

In thinking about that question, this meditation from writer Richard Rohr helped me: Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity, for God’s mind did not need changing. Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God. God in Jesus moved people beyond the counting, weighing, and punishing model of justice that we prefer, to an utterly new world. A world where God’s abundance has made any economy of merit, sacrifice, or atonement both unhelpful and unnecessary.

We all need to know that God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.

Last week, I read the verse that Martin Luther called “the gospel in miniature...” John 3:16 says that God so loved the world that God gave his only son, so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life. And we cannot forget John 3:17: Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Why did Jesus have to die? Why did the cross have to happen?

Because words were not enough. Because God wanted to stand with us in the loneliness and alienation and grief. God shows us this desire in Jesus Christ, who, baptized like us, also suffered like us.

It is just when God comes to our side in our fear, in our loneliness, in our alienation and in our grief that our fears, that our loneliness, alienation and guilt are overcome.

There is no place we can go, no suffering we can experience, there is no grief or pain or loss, in which God is not present. "There is no place you can go where God will not find you and lead you home¹."

Remember what we said during the Time for Children last week?
God loves me. The end. Amen.

I want to say again what Richard Rohr said, *We all need to know that God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.* Nothing we can do will ever decrease or increase God's eternal eagerness to love humankind. This is the meaning of the cross.

The passage for today ends like this: Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. What kind of death is that? A death that did not last, for the love of God could not be contained by a tomb. For we know that Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

Amen.

¹ <https://katebowler.com/the-harrowing-of-hell/>