

March 28, 2010

“Look To The Cross”

Sermon Text: John 12:20-26 (NIV)

²⁰Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” That is the request that we heard at the beginning of the Bible reading for today.

The inquiry came from the Greeks; that is a fascinating detail. John’s Gospel is filled with a variety of groups of people. There are the Jews and the Pharisees and the disciples, for example. These groups appear many times in John’s Gospel. Not so the Greeks; this is their one and only appearance in John’s Gospel.

Their appearance is surprising in a way. What are Greeks doing in Palestine, anyway? This is Roman-occupied land. This is the land of the Jews. So what are these Greeks doing here? Knowing a bit about the ancient Greeks, we can certainly make an educated guess that they were in Palestine on a truth-finding mission. The Greeks were probably the first ancient peoples to wander the known world in search of the truth. In their wanderings, these Greeks from a far-off land had evidently heard of this person called Jesus. They wanted to meet him. They wanted to hear his teaching. They wanted to hear his insights on the truth. So they came to Philip, a disciple with a Greek name, and they said: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

In John’s account of the story of Jesus, these Greeks really represent all the peoples of the world. They represent you and me. God became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ so that all the peoples of the world might be confronted with the truth. Jesus Christ was God’s true light to enlighten every living person. Sooner or later in life’s journey people from all races and nations of the earth will raise the same inquiry as that of the Greeks in this story. “We wish to see Jesus,” they will say.

This is a critical question for our church. Who do we show people when they come to our door? They are saying by their visit, “We wish to see Jesus.” Some churches show Jesus as the great moral example. Some churches portray him as the great psychologist, some as the “answer man” for all of life’s dilemmas. Some churches say He is Christ the Victor! Just add Jesus to your life of material success and everything will be just fine. Your life will be perfect. This is a particularly dangerous portrait, because when trouble turns up, as it will in all lives, people think Jesus has left them. We know Jesus promises to be with through all our troubles in life. We must admit that there is a bit of the truth in all of these partial portrayals of Jesus, but what is the whole truth?

Let us look back at our story. What did Jesus himself say when Philip and Andrew brought the question of the Greeks to his attention? The question from the Greeks is the occasion on which Jesus says for the first time

that his hour had come: *“The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified,”* Jesus says. And Jesus says more. He tells us how it is that he will be glorified: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*

That is how Jesus is to be glorified - His death on the cross is his glorification! *“I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself,”* Jesus says. John adds these words: *“He said this to show by what death he was to die.”*

“We wish to see Jesus,” the Greeks said to Philip. “We wish to see Jesus.” That is the request of many people in our world today. I pray that it is your request today. What we discover in this story from John’s Gospel is that if we want to see Jesus, we should look to His glorification; if we want to see Jesus, we should look to His death on the cross. That is where Jesus himself directs our eyes. The central portrait, the image of Jesus that is to control all the other images, is the portrait of Jesus dying on the cross. Do you wish to see Jesus today?

Look to the cross!

Jesus does not leave us suspended there with our wish to see Him. “Why should we look to the cross?” we might well ask. “Look to the cross,” Jesus says to us, “because this is where the judgment of this world takes place; this is where the ruler of this world is cast out. Furthermore,” Jesus says to us, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all (people) to myself.” (John 12:32).

The cross of Jesus Christ is, first of all, the place where the ruler of this world is cast out. In John 3:19 we hear that the judgment is that the light, meaning Jesus Christ, has come into the world. There are great powers of darkness at work in this world. The author of the book of Ephesians includes the power of darkness in the summation of powers that trouble our lives: *“For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”* (Ephesians 6:12)

What do you call the powers that are set against you in life? We know the reality of the powers of darkness or whatever we choose to call it. There is a dark side to the world. There is a dark side to our own personalities. There is a part of ourselves of which we are deeply ashamed. We keep it hidden as best we can; we do not wish to be exposed by the light. Truly there are powers at work; these powers bring massive doses of evil upon our world. These powers are at work within us. Thanks be to God that He puts in each of us the desire to know Him; that is one of the reasons we wish to see Jesus! Maybe He can help us - maybe He can deliver us from evil.

Jesus tells us to look to the cross. He defeated the ruler of this world through His death on the cross. You think these powers are strong now; you should have seen them before Jesus destroyed them! The powers of darkness and evil are on the run now; what we experience are only their last ditch attacks as they flee the field of battle. You are free from the power of darkness. Jesus died to set you free; He came as light to your darkened world. The ruler of this world is cast out. But that is not the only thing we see when we fix our eyes on the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ is the gateway to eternal life. *“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people*

to myself.” Jesus draws us to Himself. He binds us to Himself there. You die with Him there. You go with Him to the tomb; that means that you also live with Him in His resurrection. Death cannot hold you. The grave can’t hold you. Look to the cross and Jesus will bear you to life eternal.

Jesus Christ gave up His life for us on Calvary's tree. He gave up His life that He might cast out the ruler of this world. He gave up His life that He might draw us to His grave and through His grave to victory over death. Jesus Christ, in turn, asks us to give up our life to Him: “The one who loves life loses it, and the one who hates life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, this one must follow me.”

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” That was the request of the Greeks through Philip and Andrew to Jesus. Their request has echoed down through the centuries; in every corner of the world, people have made this same request. That request should perhaps be the daily petition of our lives - “We wish to see Jesus.” Jesus answers, “Look to my cross.” At the cross Jesus cast out the powers of darkness that want to rule in your life. At the cross He draws you to Himself, into His death, that you might live His new life with Him. Look to the cross and be set free! Take up your cross and follow Jesus each and every day of your life.