We Wish to See Jesus

A sermon preached by
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Text:
John 12: 20-33

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Lent 5
**John 12: 20-33**

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 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. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

A recent seminary graduate was appointed to his first church. As is often the case, the new preacher filled his sermon with all the knowledge he could muster from what he had just learned in seminary. He talked about the exegetical interpretation and the eschatological meaning of the resurrection as it first appeared in the Greek language of the Gospels and what that meant for the existential reality of the ecclesia, the early church, believers who were part of a resistance movement in opposition to the empire which oppressed and dominated their lives in a way which caused them to expect the coming of the paraclete bringing on the parousia.

They looked at him just like you’re looking at me.

Seminary training is often more academic and theoretical than it is practical or preachable. So after months of relentless infliction of his seminary notes on this unsuspecting congregation, he came to the pulpit one Sunday morning and found a note. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

The same request that the Greeks made of Phillip, a disciple of Jesus. “We wish to see Jesus.”

But those words in that context are deceptive. We sometimes have this expectation that the seeing of Jesus is a simple matter. And we often expect, like that new preacher’s congregation, that the pastor or some church professional has the inside track on how to show us Jesus. So the note in the pulpit – “we wish to see Jesus” – a demand of sorts for instant unveiling. As if the response is to be “Heeerrreee’s Jesus …”

But it’s not that easy, is it? The need to see Jesus is as old as the Gospels themselves. The two Greeks in John’s Gospel are in Jerusalem for the Passover. These are Greek-speaking believers in the monotheism of the Jews, the Gospels call these kinds of converts proselytes. They have heard of Jesus and they want to meet him. So they find Phillip. Why Phillip? Maybe because he has a Greek name? Maybe because he speaks in a dialect they understand? Phillip tracks down Andrew and tells him about these two. Phillip and Andrew together go to tell Jesus.

These Greek believers had a need to see Jesus but they weren’t so sure how to go about it. They figure that the best way is to go through the proper channels – follow protocol. They find someone who they have heard is a close friend of the teacher, Phillip, expecting him to carry the message to someone even closer to
Jesus. Six degrees of separation – talk to someone who knows someone who knows someone who can get to Jesus.

They probably wouldn’t have known Jesus if they had bumped into him on Jerusalem’s streets bustling with pilgrims from all over Israel there for the great festival. And Jesus was probably not what they expected anyway. He was, I suspect, different than any of the Greek philosophers or Jewish teachers that they have already encountered. But if they had changed their expectations of who and what they were looking for they might have been able to find him without anyone’s help.

Today we have that same need – to see Jesus. We put the desire in our songs. *My Sweet Lord*, George Harrison’s 1970 hit – a deliberate blending of Christian “Alleluias” and “Hare Krishna” chants of Harrison’s new found Hindu beliefs:

I really want to see you
Really want to be with you
Really want to see you lord
But it takes so long, my Lord

I really want to see Jesus. I know it takes a long time before that face-to-face reality can happen, but I want it now.

Or the 1971 musical, *Godspell*:

Day by day
Day by day
Oh Dear Lord
Three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” We really do. We really, really do. And like the Greeks of John’s Gospel, we assume there is a proper way to go about it. There must be a protocol to see Jesus. So we go to church – maybe there we’ll see Jesus. We sit patiently listening to the preacher – maybe through his or her words we’ll see Jesus. Or we open our Bibles and our self-help books – maybe in there we’ll see Jesus. There has to be a proper way to get there, isn’t there?

One of our misperceptions about seeing Jesus is that we think it’s easy. Remember the note to the young preacher – “We wish to see Jesus” – as if he could snap his fingers, say the magic words correctly, and “Poof”, there would be Jesus. As if he could have instantly changed his learning and preaching ability or change the way people received the message. In reality there is no easy way to see Jesus.

In the John story, we don’t know if the two Greeks ever get to actually see Jesus. We read that Phillip and Andrew get to Jesus with the message, but we don’t get to find out if the Greeks ever get there and we hear that the answer to the request is much more complicated than one would expect.

The question is, “Can we see Jesus?” The answer is, "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.”

What kind if answer is that?!?! All we want to do is meet the guy. A simple request. And we get back a lesson as convoluted as the young preacher’s convoluted seminary-trained sermon. But bottom line is, if you want to see Jesus, you have to know Jesus and you have to try to understand Jesus.

We cannot see Jesus from this side of the story unless we’re willing to see his glorified, exalted side. We cannot see Jesus without seeing that he was willing to die a horrible death as a result of his challenging the power of this world. We cannot see Jesus
without being willing to give up what the world stands for and want our life in this world means to us. We cannot see Jesus without following Jesus – serving Jesus. We cannot simply see Jesus. That’s what he is saying to us through John’s Gospel.

Jesus’ ministry while on this earth was limited to Israel. It functioned within the Judaism of its day. At this point in John’s Gospel Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany and now he has entered Jerusalem to prepare for the Passover. Crowds were gathering. The religious leaders were getting upset because some of the celebrants were being drawn into the Jesus crowd and they were hearing an alternative message about God’s requirements of them. After the raising of Lazarus, the crowd continued to grow around Jesus and they followed him to Jerusalem. The Pharisees, John tells us, “said to one another, ‘You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!’” They were threatened by what was happening and what the seeing of Jesus was starting to mean to the crowds.

And now the message is spreading beyond the Judaism of the Jews. It is Greek converts who are now searching for Jesus. John slips this into the story because he wants us to know that the Jesus message will spread beyond the bounds of one city or one nation, that it will spread wherever people hear the message and begin to truly see who Jesus is.

Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man, woman and child, rich or poor. We all can see Jesus now, says John. Jesus’ answer to the request to see him is that to do so you must see that his glorification and exaltation and death and life are what begins the worldwide opening of God’s message through Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus suddenly becomes accessible to all the world, to all of us. Everyone has the chance to see Jesus.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” We ask it today just as they asked it 2,000 years ago. To see Jesus today we must see him through a Resurrection faith which follows a grotesque death. And that Resurrection faith is only available through our service to the God to whom Jesus points us.

I recall several years ago one of those moments when I had the opportunity to see Jesus. He stood on my porch one evening as I arrived home with my family. I was distressed to find him there – my children were still very small and we had just come home from some family event which kept us out so late. It was near midnight. My kids were shuffled off to bed by their mom and the timer clicked off the porch light just as stepped back out to the porch to see why he was there.

I sat on the porch swing in the dark with a stranger who was asking for food and help getting back to his home. When I first saw him I mistook him for a neighbor who I had just recently met – he looked exactly like him and by the time I realized it wasn’t my neighbor, we were already into our conversation about his struggles with life.

He had a story. A story similar to many I had already heard to that early point in my ministry and have now heard many, many times since. Loss of job, broken relationships, family estrangement, a seemingly unfocused wandering through life, hoping that the church would help him on his way. Not that he expressed a clear faith or a desire to know God more deeply – nor did he ask “to see Jesus” like we might want to hear from someone who comes to the church asking for a handout.

We sat and talked. I went inside and prepared food to give him. I offered him a few dollars. We prayed. I have no idea if his temporal needs were legitimate but whenever I reflect back on that night so many years ago I have realized that it was not about those needs. It was about seeing.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”
There he was sitting on my porch in the darkness of one midnight in my life. And when I offered him my hand and a prayer he stood there with a bag of food and some money and he said to me, “You still believe in what you’re doing don’t you?” It suddenly occurred to me that I did – I do – still believe. That my faith in this very same dead, resurrected, glorified Jesus causes me to serve God and my neighbor and the strangers around me in whatever ways they need. That man’s pain needed to be eased – maybe my few minutes with him offered him some comfort – certainly those few minutes gave me an opportunity to see and to serve.

I watched him drift into the darkness of my front yard and I realized that I saw Jesus on my front porch that night and that I served Jesus as I encountered that man.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” There he is. Right there in front of us each day of our lives. Wherever we are, wherever we’re going, wherever we pause – there we see Jesus. We just have to know where we’re going and who is in our path. Do you have faith simple and complicated enough that you can see Jesus in the everyday events of your life?

When you see photos of little children dying from malnutrition or disease in places on the other side of the world, do you see Jesus in their faces? Do you see his suffering in their suffering? It was Mother Theresa who said, “I see God in every human being. When I wash the leper's wounds, I feel I am nursing the Lord himself. Is it not a beautiful experience?” Do you see Jesus when you “wash the wounds” – actually or figuratively – of the unwanted and untouchable of this world?

When you see pictures of those we might consider enemies in this world do you see Jesus? When you see those who we demonize? Those whom we “other-ize” so we can have someone to blame or hate or abuse or torture? Do you see Jesus in those who the world wants you to reject?

When you experience a birth or death, do you see Jesus in the newborn and in the aged? Do you see Jesus who was also born of a woman and who died a violent criminal’s death?

When you see a young man in a hoodie whose skin tone is darker than yours, do you see a threat that you need to eliminate with an instrument of evil that you have callously and casually strapped to your belt? Or do you see Jesus?

In photos of Trayvon Martin or George Zimmerman, in the faces of those who perpetrate the violence in our world or those who decry the violence in our society, do you see Jesus? Tomorrow night a protest march will end at Love Park, hundreds or thousands in those same hoodies speaking out against the realities of racism in our communities – will you see Jesus?

When you are told that you may not feed those who are hungry outside on the streets of your city, do you see the presumed power of a threatened empire and abide by its foolish rules or do you see Jesus hungry and thirsty and take him food and drink no matter who threatens? And when you see Jesus do you see a law-giver or a one who challenges authority when it is designed to hurt those whom God loves?

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Well, there he is. In the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly of our world – there Jesus is. If your faith is as strong as Jesus prays it will be, then you indeed can see Jesus. When opportunities to serve God in your life continue to manifest themselves right in front of your nose, in the ordinariness of your life, and your faith points you in the direction of Jesus in those opportunities, then you will truly see Jesus. "We wish to see Jesus!"

As much as it is a request or demand, it also is a question for us. It is the question that lies at the root of our spiritual quest, the question that makes us wonder if we’re going in the right direction. To see Jesus – to really see Jesus, means to understand the wonderful thing God has done in the life, death and resurrection of
Christ and then to follow Christ through our lives lived out in a world where Jesus lives even today.

Amen.