

“Seeing Jesus and Helping Others to Do the Same”

John 12:20–33

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This pulpit, at least the original part of it, has these words placed on the preacher’s side of it, “Sir, we would see Jesus.” It is an older translation of our reading from John which in the NRSV says, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” You can’t see it now because the desktop, added for me along with the base, covers it, but the words are still there, and I know they are there. It is a reminder of the common human desire to see Jesus and of the proclaimer’s responsibility to help people do so. It is a word of encouragement and admonition based on John 12:21. The irony is we don’t know if the people in the story who say this get to see Jesus, and if they do, how seeing him affects their lives.

The story is set right after John’s Palm Sunday narrative. We’re a little ahead of the liturgical calendar, but John’s chronology, as we have noted earlier this Lent, is different. Jesus also raises here the matter of whether he should ask God to save him from the cross, as he does in the Garden of Gethsemane in the other canonical Gospels, though here he does not ask. John’s Jesus does not question his mission.

But the context, as John presents it, matters because it is just after seeing Jesus ride into town to a hero’s welcome that some Greeks, Gentiles, approach Philip and ask to see Jesus. Philip, who is from Bethsaida in Galilee, close to Gentile country, which may make him more approachable, goes to Andrew, and together they tell Jesus about these folks’ request. Jesus says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” a sign that after saying earlier that “his time” has not yet come, now it has, “his time” meaning the time of his suffering and death. The appearance of Gentiles interested in him cues this statement.

Jesus goes on to talk about a grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying but then bearing much fruit. We understand that he is talking about his death and resurrection. He says that those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for

eternal life; his followers will lay down life like him. He asks for God's name to be "glorified" — another reference to the crucifixion and resurrection — and a voice from heaven speaks in such a way that the crowd thinks it is thunder, perhaps even an angel. Finally, he says the time of judgment has come, the ruler of this world — Satan — will be driven out, and Jesus will be lifted up to draw all people to him.

So, there is a lot being said here, but do the Greeks who ask to see Jesus get to see him? If they do, what do they think of what he says? It is surely not what they expect after seeing his triumphal entry. The truth is we don't know. The Greeks are not mentioned again after the beginning of the story, like many other characters in John. We don't know their fate. They are like the expendable extras in the *Star Trek* episodes. Their purpose seems to be to advance the plot.

But they do advance the plot. They express a common human desire, and Jesus offers an answer to the request many people have to this day — to see Jesus, see him as he really is, understand him. This has been a theme this Lent as we have examined a series of Johannine texts, each revealing something about the character of Christ. With this text today, we take a step further, not just because Jesus is drawing closer to the cross, but because we are talking not just about who Jesus is but how we see him and help others to do so. We want to know what helps us on this venture, and what hinders us as well.

So as to end on a positive note, we begin with the second question. What hinders us in our efforts to see Jesus and help others to do so? Sometimes, we must confess, it is the church. The church can present a distorted image of Christ as angry and judgmental or completely disinterested in how we live. Church people can talk about Jesus in one way and then live in another. The church's unwillingness to engage critical issues that affect everyone like race and sexuality, economic inequality and the care of creation, has turned off many young people. And the church can lose its way in becoming political in a partisan sense, obsessed with entertainment, focused on certain agendas.

But while all these things can hinder people's ability to see Jesus, sometimes our problem is not with what we do but what we don't do —

talk about Jesus. I will never forget a message at a seminary chapel service delivered by Old Testament professor Alberto Soggin. He had written extensively about the prophetic call to justice and love, but his sermon was about our need to tell others about who Jesus is.

It was unexpected, but while affirming our need to pursue justice and love, he said, “A lot of other people in the world do this, and we should join them. But if the church does not tell the world who Jesus is, who will?” The point was well taken. As the Apostle Paul writes to the church at Rome, “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him (Romans 10:14).” We help others to see Jesus by talking about him.

But the church is not the only thing that hinders us in our efforts to see Jesus. We have our own biases and misunderstandings, various cultural distortions, our need to remake Jesus according to our desires. In his book *Pathetic Protestant Preachers* — which I am not in, by the way, perhaps I’ll be included in the second volume — James Bright Wilson documents Oral Roberts’ claim that he had a vision of a 900-foot-tall Jesus towering over his City of Faith Medical Hospital. This big Jesus compelled him to ask for money to complete the medical complex, and after telling his “prayer partners” about this, he received \$12,000,000 in one month, and this was in the 1980s!

Maybe some of us need to start having some visions, and none of us knows what someone else has or has not seen, but we tend to conjure up the kind of Jesus we want or find useful. Some want a more muscular Jesus who wipes out our enemies, we talked about this a few weeks ago. Others want a Jesus who looks the other way when they transgress but socks it to those who are deemed to be more sinful. Many of us assume Jesus votes for our party, roots for our team, agrees with us on everything. Such assumptions hinder our ability to see Jesus.

Recognizing all this helps us to know what to avoid, but what helps us to see Jesus? One thing is a willingness to keep an open mind.

I have shared with some of you before these words of Robert Fulghum that reflect his ongoing his efforts to understand who God is.

In the credo I wrote at age twenty-one, the longest part was devoted to God.

It was a Supreme Court appeal against the existence of the Sunday-school version of the deity imposed on me in childhood. On reading my fiercely argued case, one professor said that not only had I thrown the baby out with the bathwater, but I had thrown out the soap and towel and bathtub as well — and then tried to burn down the bathroom while I was at it. Deconstruction without construction. Was there nothing, he asked, that might replace what I had so thoroughly rejected? At the time, the answer was NO, absolutely not.

Now, in this present credo... I see many layers of paint applied over that NO. Visible are faint remnants of a design for an accommodation with the idea of God as I have struggled for a self-portrait of my soul. I could construct an existential roadmap marking the long distances traveled and the varied destinations visited in search of a reconciliation with an unrelenting yearning to settle something in my mind once and for all. (*Words I Wish I Wrote*, p. 179)

Some of us identify with Robert Fulghum more than others, count me in the “more” group, but we all benefit from a willingness to keep an open mind, to keep reflecting on the character of God in light of new information and experience. The same can be said of how we see Jesus. There is ever more to learn and while sometimes it is simply a matter of adding new information, other times it requires a willingness to let go of what we thought was true to embrace what we come to believe really is.

Keeping an open mind helps us to see Jesus, and so does a willingness to read old texts with fresh eyes, including today’s reading from John. It is a text that is easy to set aside. Since John’s chronology is different, we may not be ready to hear these words about suffering and death. We may also be put off by John’s choice of words. Jesus uses a different vocabulary in John. All this talk of “glorification” makes sense if you have the key to crack the code, but if you don’t, it seems like

esoteric holy talk no one gets. If the Greeks get to see Jesus, do they know he is talking about his death and resurrection? Jesus' disciples certainly don't, at least not at this point.

But all the mystical language points to a central claim of Christian faith — that Jesus laid down his life for others, but not only that, that laying down life for others is the way to transform the world. It is counterintuitive. It goes against every instinct we have and every message of our culture, but overcoming might with might only leads to a different bully in charge.

Jesus models a different way, the way of self-giving, falling like a grain of wheat to the ground only to bear much fruit. In the first *Star Wars* film Obi-Wan Kenobi embodies this principle, allowing Darth Vader to strike him down, saying, "I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." This is what Jesus does.

If we want to see Jesus and help others to do so, we keep an open mind, we keep reading the old texts with new eyes, and we realize that we can see Jesus in many different ways – not just in scripture but in the faces of children in their openness to wonder, in the people we seek to serve as Jesus has told us he is present in the least of these, in the majesty of creation this wondrous spring, in the sacred gift of music like we have enjoyed today, and in the gifts of art and literature.

In the years after my mother left the church because of its resistance to integration and judgment of her for divorce, she worshipped in the cathedrals of Flannery O'Connor and Alice Walker, Joan Didion and Maya Angelou. She was an English literature professor, but we all have our particular sensitives, gifts, and interests. Where is Jesus in them? He is there. Can we see?

In Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* there is a character named Major Major who is very reclusive. He stays in his office all the time, and the only time anyone can go in to see him is when he is not there. Jesus is not like this. He is not playing a cosmic game of hide-and-seek. He wants to be seen and known and loved and followed. May it be our deepest longing to do so and help others to as well.