

Lent 5B

John 12:20-33

March 21, 2021

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Welcome to the last Sunday of Lent! Lent is almost over. Next week begins our Holy Week journey to Easter as we celebrate Palm Sunday and Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This year, I think many of us are more excited about the coming Easter than ever before, because the isolation thrust upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic has felt like a never-ending Lent. As more and more people become vaccinated and are venturing forth from their homes, you can feel a subtle shift in people's frame of mind from isolated desert wandering to resurrection of life. We are more than ready to finally be able to celebrate Easter in the company of others. We are ready to enter Jerusalem and see Jesus. But are we ready to see Jesus as he is rather than as we imagine him to be?

In today's Gospel, Jesus and His entourage have already entered Jerusalem for the last time. Some Greeks come to Philip and say, "Sir, we want to see Jesus." However, I'm not sure that they were willing to come face to face with the real Jesus anymore than we are.

Most of us tend to see Jesus as he is pictured in European art or in our children's bibles- blue eyed, dirty blonde to light brown hair, light toned skin, hair perfectly coiffed- not a hair out of place, robes pressed and cleaned, and a serene smile on his face. But that picture of Jesus is really kind of a fantasy, something we have created to fit our needs and to make us comfortable. On this score we are no different than the people that surrounded Jesus over two thousand years ago who pictured Jesus as the revolutionary leader who would overthrow their Roman oppressors in the here and now. They couldn't wrap their minds or hearts around a Jesus who instead gave them words to live by that would lead a revolution that has lasted for centuries.

The reality is that Jesus grew up in the Middle East, not somewhere in Europe. The chances of Jesus looking like the pictures we usually see are fairly minimal. More likely, he looked like one of the men that people in the US today look askance at and wonder if he is on the terrorist watch list. He was a carpenter; his hands would have reflected that. His nails wouldn't have been perfectly manicured. He walked dusty roads sometimes for miles. His feet would be dusty; his robes covered with dirt, wrinkled, and possibly torn from catching on a bush; his hair wind-blown.

Regardless of how Jesus physically looks in our minds eye, the Jesus that was we want to see is Jesus the friend. Jesus, the healer. Jesus, the comforter. We want to see the Jesus who will sit at our table and share a glass of wine, or cup of coffee or tea. The Jesus we want to see is the one who will make us whole, like magic, without any work involved.

But do we want to see Jesus on the cross? The Jesus in pain. The Jesus who is suffering. The Jesus with blood dripping into his eyes and down his side, his vulnerability exposed for all the world to see. The Jesus who is scorned and mocked. The Jesus who is laughed at, sneered at, taunted, “If you are truly the Son of God, come down and save yourself. Look at him, the man who was to be our savior dying on a cross. What a loser.”

If we are to truly see Jesus, then we can't see Jesus our friend, who makes us laugh and feel safe, without also seeing the Jesus full of pain, suffering, and sorrow. There is no Easter joy without the pain and loss of walking the way of the cross. We see Jesus when we recognize and acknowledge that every person is a beloved child of God in whom we can take delight- those who bring smiles to our faces and warmth to our hearts as well as those that society has labeled as “losers”. When we go to them, lift them up, give part of our life so that they may have more life, we ourselves become losers. It is through losing that we gain. Jesus warned the crowd, ‘to follow me, to see me, you must become a loser’. Blessed are the losers for they shall see Jesus.

In 2015, CBS journalist Steve Hartman did a piece about a Texas high school basketball team- the Gainesville Tornadoes. They are from a juvenile felony offenders correction facility. Their fan base is about nil- their classmates can't come, and their parents rarely, if ever, sit in the bleachers cheering for their sons. The Gainesville Tornadoes were scheduled to play Vanguard College Prep. Two boys on the Vanguard team asked their fans and cheerleaders to do something different and revolutionary- to cheer for the Gainesville team instead. And that is exactly what half the fans and cheerleaders did. They wore Tornadoes t-shirts, posted signs that said, “Go Tornadoes”. They formed a tunnel welcoming the players onto the court. During the game, they cheered and clapped and were on their feet in support of boys they didn't know and would probably never see again. When the two boys were asked why they organized this, one of the them replied, “We all need someone to believe in us. We all need someone who knows our mistakes and loves us anyway.”

Those two Vanguard boys and the rest of their team lost something that night when they gave up their fan support to others in need, and in return, gained so much more. One of the Gainesville players said, "When I'm an old man, I'll still be thinking about this." Lives were changed that night. Seeds of hope fell to the ground on that basketball court. But they didn't just lay there gathering dust. They lost their protective outer shells, took root, so that shoots of new life could burst forth and bear much fruit.

Our lives are the grains of wheat, the seeds, that Jesus talks about. We must be willing to lose our protective shell so that the love and hope we carry inside doesn't just sit gathering dust. We must open our ourselves to new possibilities, new ways of being and new ways of doing. Jesus calls us to step outside of our comfort zone, to lose or change our way of living so that we can bring life to others.

There is fertile ground all around us just waiting for us to lose our protective shells so that seeds of hope and love can take root, grow, and eventually bear fruit. But most of us are blind to it. We have created a picture in our mind of what it should look like, rather the realistic picture of what it is. To see the reality of the fertile ground we must open our eyes and our hearts to those

around us who are in pain, to those who suffer, to those who are mocked and scorned by society, to those who are vulnerable, for it is then that we see Jesus and look into His eyes. And once we see the reality, we must be willing lose a part of ourselves in service to others, to love those that society has labeled as 'losers', so that they are restored to life.

Jesus knows our mistakes and loves us anyway. As followers of Christ, can we do any less for our brothers and sisters in God's family? When we are willing lose or give up a part of our life to bring life to others, we gain a kingdom. Blessed are the losers for they shall see Jesus.

Amen.