

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 12:20-33

²⁰ 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.

Don and I live near a railroad yard. There have been many times while we are relaxing or doing something and we hear a distant rumble. Often, we will look at each other and one of us will ask, "Was that thunder?" We listen, again, for the sound and determine whether it is either trains banging around, or it is thunder.

There was a time, even before we lived where we do now, that if we determined that what we heard was thunder, I would start to feel afraid and I would respond to the sound by closing all the windows in the house. Closing the windows gave me a feeling of security.

In today's text from the Gospel of John, God's voice rings out once again from the heavens over Jesus. The people gathered near, heard the voice and asked each other whether what they heard was thunder. Others thought it was an angel speaking to Jesus. But Jesus told them, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine." Have you ever wondered, figuratively speaking, whether what you were hearing was thunder or whether it was God? What Jesus teaches us through these bible verses prior God speaking, may help us with this dilemma of discernment, AND our response.

Jesus always knew that the day would come when his ministry would make a powerful statement in an explosive way. The turn in that direction was now coming to fruition. In John 11, we read the story of Lazarus, Jesus' friend who died. This devastated Jesus. We know because the bible tells us that Jesus wept. But that story ends with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Many people were present when Jesus did this, and some went to tell the Pharisees about what happened. The Pharisees, led by fear and jealousy, then began to formulate a plot to have Jesus killed.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey for the Passover. He received a royal welcome from the people. With the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, the Jews felt certain Jesus would be a national leader who would restore their nation to its former glory.

We read today that a group of Greeks came looking for Jesus because they wanted to talk to him. We can't know for certain who these Greek people were and why they wanted to talk to Jesus. Some theologians cite the mindset of the Greek people was towards a philosophical bend. They had a desire to learn and understand. Others believed them to merely be people who were on a path of joining the faith, yet they were Gentiles. They approached Philip because he was from an area where many Greek people lived and likely knew the language. It's believed Philip asked for Andrew's assistance for the same

reasons. The disciples went to Jesus with the request from the Greeks and without hesitation, it seems, Jesus graciously met with them.

This is a rather bold and monumental move on Jesus' part. We already know from other stories of Jesus, that he was willing to cross over cultural boundaries to share the word and heal the sick. We also know, as we were reminded last Sunday when we read John 3:16, that God loves the world that he sent his Son to bring salvation for all. But what Jesus says in the verses that follow in today's text, goes even further, to put the responsibility of sharing the Good News into not only the hands of his disciples, and the faithful Jewish community, but also into the hands of the Gentiles.

Way to go Jesus. Now you've gone and gotten those who worshiped you stirred up and upset with you. Why would you even think of inviting them into the inner circle? But Jesus went even further to shake things up. He knew what many believed about him, and it wasn't what God had planned. Jesus opened that can-of-worms by first saying, "'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'" He now had the attention of everyone within hearing's distance.

For the Jews, the term Son of Man referenced the prophecies that a Messiah would rise among them, a man who would become a mighty warrior to free them from worldly oppression. Many Jews started to believe that Jesus was this man. They believed that all the mighty acts he did pointed to this. When they heard Jesus say that the Son of Man's time of glorification had arrived, they were thrilled. But then Jesus went on to burst that bubble and debunk their understanding of the Son of Man. Through his illustration about a single seed needing to die, so as to produce more seeds, he was announcing that he had to die to pay the penalty for sin, but also to show his power over death. His resurrection proves he has eternal life. Jesus can give this same eternal life to all who believe in him.

Furthermore, as Jesus describes how a grain of wheat must first die in the earth before bearing fruit, we should hear his call to discipleship to the Greeks and all others who seek him, including us. Jesus implies that for the glorification of the Son of Man to be complete, there must be a new crop of disciples who can proclaim him as the glorified one.

As people on this side of the empty tomb, this side of the resurrection, we have heard the good news of resurrection for all, the good news of eternal life over death. Yet questions about what death feels like, what eternity looks like creates doubts over whether eternal life really exists...creating anxiety and fear. It sends people seeking security and succumbing therefore to selfishness for joy and survival in this lifetime.

In order for Jesus' mission to continue, he looks for tried and true FOLLOWERS. He needs people who like him, are willing to give sacrificially of themselves. People willing to let die those things that trap them in prisons created by selfishness and fear, and tear down walls around them designed to provide them with safety and security.

Jesus needs people not merely looking for a Messiah, people looking for him, perhaps as someone who will provide an easy road to travel. Jesus needs people willing to be in a relationship with him, committed to his teachings and dedicated to work with him in God's mission to the world which God loves.

The world owes a lot to people who gave everything of themselves, people who spent their strength, put aside their fears and insecurities for God and God's mission. You and I might be lost in pervasive hopelessness originating and growing because of our bad experiences in and the mantras from the darkness of this world.

We all fight our battles with fears of the unknown, needs for security, desires for comfort and ease. Jesus, being a man, also had his inner battles. He so much as admits this in verse 27 when he said, "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."

March 17, 2024 - "Was that Thunder I Heard?"

In the other gospels we read that Jesus fights these feelings as he goes to God privately in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. John does not record this story. He instead reveals this battle within Jesus as Jesus admits it publicly. In the end, Jesus said he will follow through with God's plan so that God will be glorified, not because Jesus did this, but because others, like you and me would be saved and inspired to continue the work of Jesus.

And then it happened. Thunder! Rather, the voice of God spoke for all to hear. Jesus told the people that God spoke for all to hear for their benefit. He said, "Now is the judgment of this world," meaning some will run and hide from the thunder, and others, will bury their inhibitions and allow the seeds of Christ's love to bloom, from which will emerge ways to glorify and honor God by continuing the work of planting seeds and helping them grow.

Pediatrician David Cerqueira tells the story of a little girl in his wife's Sunday School class. His wife had prepared a lesson on being useful and told the children that everyone can be useful in serving God. There was a short moment of silence, and a little girl named Sarah spoke up. "Teacher, what can I do?" she said. "I don't know how do to many useful things."

Mrs. Cerqueira had not anticipated that kind of response, but she quickly looked around and spotted an empty flower vase on the windowsill. "Sarah," she said, "you can bring in a flower and put it in the vase. That would be a useful thing."

Sarah frowned. "But that's not important."

"It is," her teacher said, "if you are helping someone."

Sure enough, the next Sunday Sarah brought in a dandelion and placed it in the vase. In fact, she continued to do so each week. Without reminders or help, she made sure the vase was filled with a bright yellow flower, Sunday after Sunday. When her pastor found out about it, he put the vase in the main sanctuary next to the pulpit. That Sunday he gave a sermon on the honor of serving others, using Sarah's vase as an example. The congregation was touched by the message, and the week started on a good note...

But during that same week, Sarah's family discovered she had leukemia. David Cerqueira was her pediatrician, and he did his best to explain to Sarah's parents that nothing could be done to save her life. He says, "I don't think I have ever had a more difficult conversation than the one that night."

Eventually, Sarah became confined to bed and to the visits that many people gave her. She lost her smile. She lost most of her weight; and then, the end was near.

That Sunday, at the end of his sermon, the pastor suddenly stopped speaking. His eyes wide, he stared at the back of the church, and everyone turned to see what he was looking at. It was Sarah! Her parents had brought her for one last visit. She was bundled in a blanket, a dandelion in one little hand.

She slowly walked to the front of the church where her vase was still perched by the pulpit. She put her flower in the vase and a piece of paper beside it. Then she returned to her parents.

Four days later, Sarah died... At the funeral, the pastor showed Dr. Cerqueira the note Sarah had left. It said, "Dear God, This vase has been the biggest honor of my life. Sarah."

What has been the biggest honor of your life? What are you thinking about when you are reminded of Christ's death on the cross? Such amazing sacrificial love as was displayed on the cross by God, through his Son, demands giving our all to honor and glorify God. When you hear God's voice thundering, in your thoughts, in your heart, through experiences or through the words of another person, don't run and shut the windows of your soul. Instead respond by bringing honor and glory to God through acts and words that help to build God's eternal kingdom. Amen.