

DO YOU WANT TO SEE JESUS?

John 12:20-37

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Today we're one week away from Palm Sunday and two weeks away from Easter. For many families it primarily means there are only two weeks to get ready for Easter dinner. "Will it be at my house, my mother's or my sister's? Since it was at my house last Easter, it needs to be someone else's turn. I'll bring the deviled eggs and desserts, but I don't have the time to prepare a full meal for fifteen people this year."

Please forgive me for starting out a tad snarky this morning, but you get my drift. Most people don't get the real implications of Easter because either people are getting too secular or the Church has dropped the ball, or both. I for one believe its option number three, people have become more secular and the Church has dropped the ball. How else can you explain the lowered attentiveness to the most Holy Week of the year?

Not so long ago I talked with a thoughtful friend who said, "I'm sometimes tempted to go back to church, but then another scandal breaks and I'm reminded why I left in the first place."

My friend is wise enough to realize not all Christians are hypocrites; he'd be the first to acknowledge the people in his neighborhood who profess to be Christian are decent and generous people. But organized religion, he thinks, has a way of corrupting something good and turning it into something not so good. The agenda seems to be driven primarily by promoting the institution instead of primarily professing Christ.

I hate to say it, but Jesus would agree with my friend. The organized religion of his day became corrupt and moribund, a far cry from the standards set by the Old Testament prophets who cried out against a cheap and easy religion in place of a life of love and service. Yes, the religious establishment honored the prophets but only because they were long dead and gone. Time has a way of mellowing what was once biting and offensive. Case in point: Martin Luther King, Jr. Everybody honors him today but 50 years ago most people thought he was a radical trouble maker, dividing the country.

In the week immediately prior to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem the entrenched religious establishment was convinced Jesus was a radical troublemaker dividing the country. The icing on the cake was Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. This happened in Bethany a village within a stone's throw of Jerusalem.

You may remember from John's Gospel that just before he commanded "Lazarus, come out!" that curious verse that reads, "Jesus wept." Traditionally, Jesus' weeping was interpreted to mean he was mourning with Lazarus' sisters. But why would that be if Jesus knew within minutes Lazarus would be alive again?

No, Jesus was weeping for himself because he knew the moment he commanded Lazarus to step out of his tomb he'd be signing his own death warrant because as the word spread, the religious leaders in Jerusalem would finally say, "Enough is enough, let's be rid of him once and for all!"

Caiaphas, the high priest that year, cynically rationalized their decision when he said, "...it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." (John 11:50) In other words, "Let's handle this situation in house before the Romans get involved in their heavy handed way."

All this is the context for today's gospel reading according to John. Religious and political factions, including the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Herodians and the Zealots, each normally distrusting and even despising each other, came together as one because "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Events were beginning to move quickly before spiraling out of control and Jesus knew what was coming.

That explains why when Andrew and Philip came to Jesus with the news some Greeks wanted to see Jesus he didn't acknowledge the request. We can only speculate why Jesus didn't even say, "No, not now." Could it be Jesus suspected they were religious tourists, chronic philosophers who loved to exchange ideas and debate lofty thoughts without ever making a commitment? If that's the case, Jesus couldn't be bothered, especially not now. Instead he said to Andrew and Philip, "Those who love this life will lose it... Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am there will my servant also be." (John 12:25-26)

To really "see Jesus" is much more than satisfying your curiosity. Really seeing Jesus means allowing yourself to see yourself through Jesus' eyes until you see yourself needing Jesus in your life. It also means seeing Jesus letting go of everything, even his own life, in order to bring life to the world through his death. This is the core conviction of Christianity. If you don't see this, you really can't see Jesus.

You can't just flirt with Christ and his gospel. Just as Jesus dismissed the would-be disciples who wanted to first go home and settle their family and business affairs, Jesus again made himself clear, this time by simply ignoring the Greek's request for a personal audience and scintillating conversation. Unless they were prepared to lay down their lives, as he would soon lay down his life, he had no time for them because there was precious little time left.

We know this was his thinking because he said quite openly to Andrew and Philip, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, Father save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name." (John 12:27-28)

Jesus was troubled but resolute. He knew he couldn't ask his Father to let him off the hook at the last minute and deny his reason for coming into the world in the first place.

Now if that's true of him, then what about us? That all depends on whether you want to be a disciple and follow him or become a would-be disciple who'll promise to follow only when it's convenient.

What I'm about to say is terribly important. The true test of discipleship is in your willingness to follow Jesus' example, who willingly participated in the events leading up to and ending at the cross, by participating in your own death. What does that mean, "participate in your own death?" It means giving up your life so you don't lose your soul, giving up any attitude or behavior that keeps Christ from filling up your dark and empty places where both your secret and obvious sins fester and poison your sense of self.

Be aware, your old self, your own personal bundle of self-destructive thoughts and habits will fight like hell to survive. But you can put it to death by inviting Jesus to move in and take over. Out with the bad and in with the new, only because the deep and mysterious power of God was unleashed on the cross, causing a seismic shift for good that can never be reversed, unless you let it.

This is what Christ was facing and preparing for when told those Greeks wanted to see him. Good intentions weren't good enough, only the hard commitment to follow through by following Jesus to his cross. Otherwise, we'll all stay the same, curious religious tourists who after counting the cost are content to flirt with and not commit to Christ and his gospel.

So much for the all inclusive meek and mild Jesus who loves everybody no matter what. I'm not suggesting Jesus won't love us no matter what, but I am saying when we make ourselves useless, Jesus can't accomplish anything through us if we don't take him seriously. So what does he want? All Jesus wants from you is to give him the best of what you've got.

William Barclay tells the story of Mrs. Berwick, a retired Salvation Army worker living through the Blitz, when the Nazi air force was bombing London during the Battle of Britain. She was old and feeble but her desire to serve her neighbors was youthful and strong. Not knowing what else to do she put together a simple first aid box and put a sign in her window: "If you need help, knock here." There's someone willing to give the best of what she's got. Jesus expects nothing more or nothing less.

I began this morning with my snarky observations of people maneuvering themselves away from being responsible for Easter dinner. But I don't apologize for it because in a greater sense it's what most of us do when we think we're being singled out to carry the ball and we think it's someone else's turn. I also spoke of my friend who was burned by organized religion in general and the religious establishment's abuses in particular, but still respects genuine expressions of faith.

When I exhort you to discipleship, please don't confuse it with churchmanship. Sure the Church needs able and willing workers to keep things moving in the right

direction. God bless all of you who give your time and talents to our ministries. But what Christ really needs is disciples who really see Jesus in friends, neighbors and even strangers who need to be loved and served. The world needs more Mrs. Berwicks whose lives spell out the opened invitation, "If you need help, knock."

Next Sunday is Passion Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. Next Sunday we are also confirming our young adults who will confirm the promises made on their behalf by their parents and godparents at their baptism.

If you haven't already opened your Lenten Devotionals and your hearts and minds in prayer and meditation or opened your hearts to the least of these, I urge you to do so especially during these last two weeks in Lent. Why? Because I want you to see Jesus.