

March 17, 2018

TOUGH CHOICES

John 12: 20-33

Let's have a conversation about Jesus. The period of Lent through Good Friday and on to the resurrection is all about Jesus: His temptation, triumphal entry to Jerusalem, cleansing of the Temple, betrayal, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. So, let's have a conversation about Jesus.

How do you feel about Jesus - really feel about him? How does he make you feel? How do you relate to him? If you had the chance to speak to Jesus in the flesh, what would you want to talk about?

Each one of us has an understanding of Jesus that shapes our relationship with him. And I would venture to say that in many instances, our understanding of Jesus is one with which we are comfortable. I would go further to say that, quite often, it is an understanding that is more reflective of our lives than it is of his – an understanding that quite likely aligns more with our thinking and needs than with his demands of us. Whatever we think of Jesus and however we view him, how many of us, if any, can claim to have a complete understanding and unquestioning acceptance of him?

John begins the portion of the Gospel that was read today by saying: "Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus. Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus." (John 12: 20-22)

The festival to which John refers is the Feast of the Passover, for which Jews from all over would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate. We don't know if the Greeks that John mentioned were Jews of Greek nationality or non-Jews. We don't know if they were in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast or to observe the celebrations. But whatever their reason for being in Jerusalem, they wanted to see Jesus.

Why were they so eager to see Jesus? I suppose one can say that they wanted to see Jesus because He was the star of the show. There was a buzz around town about this him.

What would have likely created that buzz? Two things!

One is Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem when Jesus openly defied and challenged the powers that be and the system of oppression.

The other was Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead, an act of defiance of and triumph over our worst enemy—death.

In the eyes of many, those two acts would have cemented Jesus' claim that he was the Messiah, the deliverer, the anointed one, the Son of God. And for those who did not view such things through a religious lens, those two acts would have elevated Jesus as someone special and extraordinary in their eyes.

So, it is not surprising that these Greeks, whether religious or not, wanted to see Jesus.

But I believe that they were probably surprised, maybe even disappointed, because the Jesus that was revealed to them was quite likely not the Jesus that they were expecting. He was not the miracle-working Jesus. He was not the triumphant Jesus facing down the powers that be! Instead, he was a Jesus who was talking about his death and about giving up one's life. And more, he was saying that that is what is required of anyone who would follow him.

Is that the Jesus that the Greeks wanted to see? I very much doubt it. But the more important question is: Is that the Jesus we want to see? Is that the Jesus that we want to follow?

I return to the questions that I asked at the beginning. How do you feel about Jesus - really feel about him? How does he make you feel? How do you relate to him? If you had the chance to speak to Jesus in the flesh, what would you want to talk about?

Does Jesus's revelation of himself to the Greeks align with our understanding of him? Is it an understanding with which we are comfortable?

I must admit that there are times when Jesus makes me uncomfortable. Not because I find what he says or does unacceptable, but because he so often presents us with difficult choices.

Like when he says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14: 26) If you have to let go of those closest to you in order to follow Jesus, that can be a very difficult choice to make.

And when he says: “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (Matthew 5: 39-42) Are those things that we would readily do or even do at all? Are we not inclined to say I am not sure about that?

Then there’s that rich young man who went to Jesus and asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Go sell what you have, give the money to poor and then come and follow me.” The Bible says that he walked away sad because he had great possessions. Honestly, on whose side would be with that one?

In today's reading, we hear Jesus saying, “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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Tough choice!

It presents us with a tough choice because Jesus is not giving a lesson in biology or agriculture; he is talking about how we choose to live our lives. It’s about the choice between the anxiety of letting go and the security of holding on. Letting go of what we know and have – things that make us feel good, and holding on to what is familiar and comfortable and makes us feel safe. What will it be? Will it be the new but risky, dangerous and certainly demanding path that can lead us to something greater, or will it be the old and comfortable that will, at best, keep us where we are and, at worst, drag us down? That is the choice that Jesus puts before us.

The Jesus that was revealed to the Greeks who asked to see him and who is revealed to us often presents us with tough choices. He makes it clear that he is not some superstar who is to be admired and sought out only when we need help. He is a servant leader who calls us to follow him so that we might be drawn more deeply into the saving work of God through our love for, our service to, and our sacrifice on behalf of those around us. Jesus comes to demonstrate God’s strength through vulnerability, God’s power through what appears as weakness, and God’s justice

through self-giving love, mercy and forgiveness. And he calls those who would follow him to the very same kind of life and self-giving love.

Is this the Jesus we really want to see? We each have to answer that question for ourselves. But what I do know is that the Jesus who reveals the heart of our loving God by going to the cross is the Jesus that we get, whether we like it or not. And that Jesus, who is raised again on the third day, demonstrates that love is more powerful than hate and life more enduring than death. And he did all that, not by clinging to the life he had, but by letting go of it for our sakes so that all can look forward to a new and better life.

That is the Jesus who, in the end, has promised to draw all of us to Himself, so that where he is, we will be also, and the life that is his will be ours as well.

When, like a seed, we fall to the ground and die, when we let go of the stranglehold that so many things in life have on us, and we surrender ourselves to the transforming power of God's love, we grow into someone better, and we become part of something bigger. We get to witness lives being changed for the better. We get to see hope kindled in the eyes of people who had given up. We get to share the joy of those who experience unconditional love, especially those who were made to feel unloved. We get to see systems that support injustice crumble. And the best of all is that we get to be a part of making those things happen, and that is priceless.

When, in response to Christ's call, we practice self-giving love, we grow to become a gift of love to the world that keeps on giving, even as we keep on receiving. For love never ends.

Thanks be to God.

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