

Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Hebrews 5:5-10, Psalm 119, John 12:20-33  
David Teschner  
March 22, 2015

A woman in one of our Bible study classes always likes it when we read from John's gospel. She is not alone in liking John's gospel as many Christians find it to be their favorite. What surprises me over and over is the reason she gives for preferring it: She finds John to be direct, and he says what he means.

She and I disagree about that. John may be direct, but I find that Jesus rarely answers a question in a clear, concise way. And rarely does he have a normal, predictable encounter with another person in the gospel.

Take, for example, the story this morning about some Greeks who want to see Jesus. They have come to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. There were many, perhaps thousands of Gentile adherents to the Jewish belief in one God. These "God fearers," as they were called, were also drawn to the moral laws the Jews followed, especially the 10 commandments. They didn't want to keep the restrictive food laws or the austere Sabbath regulations, however, so they never became outright converts to Judaism.

These particular God fearers have presumably heard about Jesus as a new sort of Jewish teacher and holy man and wish to meet him. They approach Philip, who has a Greek name, who in turn goes to Andrew. The two of them go to Jesus with their request. Now we might expect Jesus to say, "Sure, bring them right over." Or "No, I don't have time to talk with them today, maybe tomorrow." But the text says, "Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'" Then he proceeds to talk about seeds dying in the ground, hating one's life, and his servants following him.

What happened to the Greeks and their simple request to see Jesus? And what does he mean, "His hour has come"?

John's gospel is full of what I call cryptic language, and there are certain code words that mean far more than their surface understanding. "Hour" is one of those words in John.

You might remember that Jesus' first miracle in John's gospel was turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. When his mother approaches him after the wine has run out, Jesus says, rather curtly, "Woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." A couple of more times in John, Jesus will also say that his hour has not yet come.

Finally this morning, his hour has come in response to some Greeks wanting to see him. What does it mean? To understand, we need the help of scholars and code breakers.

Jesus' "hour" is his moment on the cross when he will reveal the Father's glory (another code word in John). The Father's glory, revealed on the cross, is the full extent of God's love for the entire human race. Such a love will draw all people to the Father through the Son.

It is believed that the request from the Greeks to see Jesus is his sign that the wider world beyond Israel and the Jewish people is now ready to receive the Son's great revelation.

We are approaching the season of the cross. Lent is drawing to a close. Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday is a week away, and Holy Week, culminating in Good Friday, is in less than two weeks.

The ambiguity and paradox of the cross has troubled even believers for 2,000 years. Along with his earliest followers, we would expect Jesus to say, "Take up your sword and follow me into battle!" and instead he says, "Take up your cross and follow me into mercy and kindness!"

During World War II, there was a parish priest named Father Domenico Mercante. He served God and the people of the mountain village of Giazza in Italy. One day German paratroopers came to Giazza, and some of the villagers tried to resist them. The well trained and equipped German soldiers quickly put down the resistance and captured one of the villagers. They placed him against a wall and were about to execute him when Father Domenico stepped forward and begged them to spare his life. When they refused his request, the Catholic priest offered to take the man's place in front of the firing squad. The Germans agreed and were about to shoot him instead when one of the soldiers stepped out of line and said he couldn't shoot a priest. The German soldier in charge ordered him to stand beside Father Domenico, and both men were shot dead.

Was this a waste of two good lives? Should Father Domenico have thought that by saving his life he could have done so much more for the people of the village? Was the soldier a fool to lose his life because his faith and conscience caused him to refuse an order to kill an innocent man? What about his family and his country?

This story is still being told today. Father Domenico's sermons are long forgotten, but his sacrifice that day will never be forgotten by generations of people in and around Giazza and now you and me.

Who knows how that young soldier's act of courageous defiance affected every soldier there? I suspect his witness that day still haunts his former brothers in arms. He may have caused them to question Hitler's evil scheme.

When Jesus says a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die if it is to bear much fruit, we know this is a reference to his own life. If Jesus had avoided Jerusalem and the cross and lived and died of old age, it is very questionable whether there would be a Christian faith today.

Christianity is not for the faint of heart or at least it shouldn't be. Some say belief in God is a crutch that only weak or wounded people need and use. Jesus doesn't ask us to carry a crutch, but rather his cross.

Further, when Jesus says that we are to hate our lives to keep them for eternal life, he doesn't mean it literally. Writing at a time when to be a Christian meant the possibility of arrest, persecution and even death, John is encouraging the faithful to choose Christ even if it results in suffering or death. Living for Jesus and others and not for self or family alone, we all know, is far more rewarding and satisfying.

Today, for us who live in a country where our religious preference is protected under the law, to choose Christ might best be summarized in the dismissal I use at our Celtic services.

*Go out into the world in peace, have courage, hold on to what is good, return no one evil for evil, strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering, honor everyone, love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.*

The hour has come for you and me to live more fully into our faith so we may glorify Christ in our own lives. AMEN.