

Fifth Sunday in Lent March 21, 2021

John 12:20-33

At my home church of St. Mark's Lutheran in Charlotte, NC you climb into the pulpit by taking a short flight of steps. On the wall as you go up, about head height, is a wooden plaque that the preacher can't help but see as they mount the pulpit. On it, is a quote from our Gospel reading, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Growing up, I spent many hours looking at that sign as I listened to the preachers in the pulpit while I served as an acolyte or crucifer. I thought about that sign as I went through seminary (both times) and particularly as I prepared to preach myself. In fact, I have a photo of that sign in my office above my desk. A gift from a friend many years ago.

While that sign was a warning and a reminder to the preachers mounting those steps that their job was primarily to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ, that statement from the Greeks also has much to say to all of us.

We wish to see Jesus.

We are a visual culture. Words, both written but even more oral, are losing importance. We are a "Show me" kind of folk. Particularly the generations following mine.

For the most part, people don't want you to talk with them about Jesus. They don't want proof of Jesus, or apologetics. They don't want a program or pamphlet.

They want you to show them Jesus. They want to experience Jesus.

They want their broken hearts to be healed. They want to be comforted when they fear for their lives. They want forgiveness for the places where they have hurt others. They want their souls to be fed. They want to know that they are loved and valued. They want to know why they were created, what they are called to be and do.

They want to see Jesus in the flesh before them.

And that is our calling as the Body of Christ that is the church. To show people Jesus by feeding, loving, comforting, teaching them as Jesus would. Charles Cousar in his commentary on Galatians points out that our life as a people of faith is not about a process or program, but a mission to love each person according to their need. The life of faith is about relationship with those whom God loves in the world. Is there anyone NOT on that list?

We wish to see Jesus.

Okay, take a look at The Dwelling, a ministry of a classmate of mine in Winston-Salem, NC. It is focused primarily on those experiencing homelessness- Their website states that “The Dwelling proclaims boldly that there is holiness in the identity as someone experiencing homelessness, that they share a kinship with God who reminds us all that we are all wanderers in search of belonging. Belonging that can only be found in the waters of baptism and at the table - where outsiders are no more.

The Dwelling reflects the radical counter-cultural nature of the cross - where shame is glory and identity in Christ replaces the damaging narrative that the world so easily affixes to people in the margins.

This church is for the wanderers, the seekers, the questioners, the doubters. The ones that feel worthy and more importantly the ones that do not. This is the place where God and God's people meet. Come and Dwell.”

In their mission they show people Jesus- Providing shelter for those without it (God provides a home for the homeless, doesn't she?), washing them clean not just with the baptismal waters, but literally- one of their ministries is mobile showers- essential for those without a permanent place to live, feeding their physical bodies with food beyond the Eucharist (the 5,000, the 4,000, the disciples on Passover).

In this way, the folks at The Dwelling show people Jesus. Give them the experience of his indiscriminating love, meeting their physical and spiritual needs, accepting them as they are where they are... but not leaving them there instead entering into relationship with them and loving them into the fullness of who God created them to be.

The folks at The Dwelling know what Jesus' response is when word gets to him of the request of the Gentiles. He begins to talk about his death and the resurrection that is to follow. For it is only in dying that the single seed can produce many heads of grain.

It is only in dying to our selfishness, our oversized regard for ourselves, that we can begin to produce the fruits of the Spirit of Christ- love, joy, peace, patience kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control.

This is where the stumbling block of Christ's message comes in. For if we love our life first and foremost- we will lose it. But if we love Christ more than our life- we

will keep it. This is true love that we would “risk” our lives for the sake of our neighbor. That we would love them in the same way Christ would, because where Christ would be- there we are. And when we are there, when we comfort the grieving, when we feed the hungry, when we bring healing to the sick, when we shelter those experiencing homeless, then Christ is there.

Then those we meet will truly see Jesus. In the flesh. In us.

But we know from our time in Paul’s letter to the Galatians this Lent that there is not risk here. Right? Because we know that in Christ God has freed us from bondage to sin, death, the devil. Has freed us from anything that this world might threaten us with. There is no risk, so we are free to show other people Jesus.

And even as we show others Jesus, we want this, too, don’t we? To see Jesus.

To experience that unconditional love. To feel that healing. To know forgiveness. To be restored to relationship.

We know as those claimed in the waters of baptism that we have that. We can “get it” cognitively. But Martin Luther was right. We are a people of the flesh and we need to have this reality embodied. To feel that hug, to hear the sound waves of that voice, to smell the scent of the one who brings us those things.

It is why I made use of personal confession and forgiveness years ago when my divorce was finalized, because I needed to speak aloud to another human being my own fault and sin in that relationship ending and to hear spoken back the words that I knew, but could not fully experience- until I heard the voice say, “I forgive you of all your sins in this relationship ending.”

And so, even for each other, we are called to be the embodiment of Christ. Both as individuals and as a community.

This is the simplicity and difficulty of our faith. The easiest way to proclaim the gospel to others is to live it. To be Jesus for someone. To love all those who we meet- even the difficult, even the hateful, even the ungrateful, even those we believe are undeserving.

The most difficult way to proclaim the gospel to others is to live it. To be Jesus for someone- because it means loving all those who we meet. The difficult, the hateful, the ungrateful, those we think are undeserving.

Friends in Christ, how well are we as a congregation doing at showing people Jesus? Embodying for them the one who brings salvation. To love them unconditionally, just as Christ does.

Friends in Christ, where are there opportunities to show others in your life Jesus? To embody for them the one who brings salvation. To love them unconditionally, just as Christ does.

Friends in Christ, where have you had others embody Christ for you? Who are the people who have loved you when you were most unlovable? Who are the people who comforted you when you were afraid? Who are the ones who spoke a word of healing that resurrected your life?

As our Lenten journey comes to an end, let us give thanks to God for all those who have shown us Jesus in how they lived and let us pray for the courage and strength to die to the selfishness of this world and with the resurrected life we are given- strive to show Jesus to everyone we meet.