

Jeremiah 31:31-34
John 12:20-33

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Sunday, March 29, 2009, 5th Sun. in Lent

Growing in Discipleship

In today's reading, John introduces the presence of men from Greece who have come to hear the voice of Jesus Christ. These Greeks are God-fearing Gentiles, converts to Judaism, who come to worship and feast at the festival of the Passover. They present themselves first to Philip, himself a Greek, asking to see Jesus for the purpose of getting to know Christ.

John portrays Philip as seeming to be a bit indecisive and not sure what to do with these respectful Greeks. So he checks with Andrew who is nicknamed among the disciples as the "introducer" or the "middleman." Together Philip and Andrew present the request of the Greeks to Jesus. What makes the Greeks important, comes through in Christ's comment, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." This seems to mean that Jesus' death is imminent with their arrival. The Greeks seem to represent a waiting world. Their arrival is the sign to Christ that the time has come for Him to lay down His life for us.

Jesus compares His own death to the parable of the grain of wheat which must die if there is to be growth and development of disciples. There is no fruit unless there is the death and burial of the seed. This will be the glorification of the Son of Man. While Jesus is the almighty Son of God, He comes to earth lowly, meek, and humble, to be crucified so that sin and death can be destroyed. His disciples are also involved in this growth and development.

For disciples, following Jesus becomes a life of service in learning to be obedient to Christ. As disciples, we will then be with Jesus wherever He is, in this world or in eternity. Christ says in verse 26, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

Jesus is not really ignoring the Greeks, as He seems to be. They come to see Jesus through the faithful witness and ministry of obedient disciples who have given their lives to serve Jesus wherever He is. We catch glimpses of the growth of the disciples of Jesus with the poor and emotionally damaged who come our way. We are all joyful worshipers, rejoicing in Christ’s healing and salvation as we become salt and light in the midst of the world.

Jesus Christ, the Man who is weary at the well with the Samaritan woman and who weeps before the tomb of Lazarus does not go automatically or casually to the Cross of Calvary. His body seems to shrink away from this horrible death. Here we read the anguish and longing of Christ to avoid the Cross.

There is no turning back from the decision already made before He came to this earth. Jesus comes in loving obedience to God the Father’s will, and every move of His ministry is a response to God’s eternal plan. Christ’s faithfulness brings Him to this time. There will never be growth in discipleship; the Greeks and others will never come to know Christ, unless Jesus completes this mission. Jesus Christ comes for the purpose of being crucified on the Cross of Calvary for us! So Jesus’ trembling, questioning cry, “Father, save Me from this hour?” is answered by the Son’s decisive

prayer of obedience, “Father, glorify Your name.” That name is entrusted to Jesus. In Christ’s last, costly act, He will lift up that name above all other names.

The judgment of God will be known in what is to take place. The Cross is always a time and place of crisis and decision, where darkness and evil are unmasked and overcome, but also where faith and life are released.

Roger Fredrikson recalls leaving a Billy Graham crusade in New York many years ago with thousands of other hushed and thoughtful people. They had just heard Rev. Graham preach a powerful sermon about the Cross. Mr. Fredrikson sensed an unusual spirit of God’s presence during the service even though a soft drizzle was falling during most of it. At the climax, hundreds came forward to stand quietly and pray and receive encouragement in their decisions. As they were leaving, Mr. Fredrikson remembers hearing someone say, “Billy’s always best when he preaches about the Cross.” Mr. Fredrikson’s comment to himself was, “And why not? That is the pivotal point, the center of it all, the place of judgment and life.”

The attitude of Jesus toward His imminent death becomes a model for all believers. Jesus connects His own death with an understanding that life cannot be stored up and hidden away. Only those who are prepared to give up everything can receive the gift of eternal life, both now and forever.

John’s Gospel insists that the death of Jesus is both His exaltation and an exaltation belonging to believers as God honors those who serve Jesus. Both forms of honor and glory exist, because, and only because, God gives them.

Believers are honored by God for their service. Jesus is exalted, lifted up; but it is God's name which is glorified. Nowhere in this concept does John make a place for believers to bring honor on themselves. There is only the place for us to acknowledge the God who exalts and lifts up Christ Jesus, even and especially in His death.

By drawing all people to Himself, Jesus anticipates eventually overcoming world opposition and opening the door for hope that all people will be drawn to Him. The arrival of the Greeks to come to know Christ is the beginning of the world being drawn to Him. All through Christ's ministry, there are people from all walks of life following Him, listening to Him, coming to be healed by Him. Christ's magnetic yet calm and peaceful personality draws people to Him naturally. We, too, are drawn to Christ. As disciples who are in various and continuing stages of growth in Christ, we bring those around us to come to know Him and to grow with us. We not only continue to grow, but we continue to serve Christ in more ways than we could ever count.

Christ comes to earth knowing His purpose. We come to earth not necessarily knowing our purpose but trusting in God to guide us to know His purpose for us in doing His will. Many of us already know our purpose and know how God calls us to follow Him. Regardless, God will open the doors for us to find our purposes. But He does it in His time, not ours.

We will not be called to die on the Cross of Calvary. Only Jesus is called to do this. We are called to read our Bibles; pray; follow the Great Commandments; reach out to others; open our hearts and minds to Christ to

do His will; and to love, obey, and serve Christ all our days. It is comforting to know that no matter what we do, God will love, forgive, and care for us always. It is comforting to know Christ died so that we may continue to love, obey, and serve Him.

In some areas of the world, this is not possible. Rev. Morris Youssef, pastor of the Arabic Presbyterian faith community sharing worship facilities with Moorestown Presbyterian Church, shared at the most recent Presbytery meeting that while pastoring various Presbyterian churches in Egypt in the Synod of the Nile, he was actually shot while spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ because evangelism, as we know it, is not permitted in Egypt. Luckily, he escaped with non-life-threatening injuries. He planted and pastored three different churches in Egypt in the fourteen years he was there. He counts his blessings every day and is thrilled to be leading a Presbyterian Church he planted in Moorestown. We are thankful for his love of God and his service to the Word.

May we each continue to grow in our discipleship with Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. During this Lenten season and always, may we joyfully serve Him, trust in Him, bring others to know Him and the Bible, and grow in our own love, faith, and trust in Jesus Christ. Amen!