

## Altered By Losing Our Life to Save It

John 12:20-33

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We are all in some way seekers this morning, are we not? We have come to church this morning looking for help—for a word, an idea, a hymn, a prayer, a text that will help us make sense of the distressing events occurring in the world around us; for a word, an idea, a hymn, a prayer, or a person who will help us cope with the news we see on television, and in the daily paper.

We are all in some way looking for Jesus this morning, although we probably wouldn't say it that way. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" is the way some Greeks put it to Philip, one of Jesus' disciples in our text from the Gospel of John this morning. That's us, whether we say it or not. "We wish to see Jesus."

David Brooks wrote a fascinating article some time ago for the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title "Kicking the Secularist Habit." Secularism, Brooks now says, was a big mistake. "Secularism is not the future; it is yesterday's incorrect version of the future." It's not really economics that drives human behavior. "People everywhere (whether they go to church or not)," Brooks says, "long for meaning, purpose, and righteousness beyond economics... Human beings yearn for a world that reflects God's will in many cases as strongly as they yearn for money or success." It's the same request those Greeks made to Philip, asked in a 21<sup>st</sup> century way: "We wish to see Jesus."

This is an odd story from John, which happens just after Palm Sunday. It's the beginning of Jesus' final discourse—or sermon if you will—during the last week of his life and appears only in John's gospel.

Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. They ask Philip. Philip tells Andrew and Philip and Andrew tell Jesus, "There are some Greeks looking for you." Jesus responds with a little story about a grain of wheat remaining just that, a single grain, unless it falls into the earth and dies, and then it produces much fruit.

And then he teaches: those who love their lives, maintain the status quo, protect, and conserve their lives, will lose them. But those who hate their lives—elsewhere he says, "lose their lives for my sake"—will find them, will have eternal life, real life, full life. It is one of the consistent motifs in the New Testament. If you want to live, really live, you have to learn to give your life away, you have to learn how to die.

And then this haunting statement, which over the years I have always found so compelling: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

When it happened, when he was lifted up from the earth on a cross, when he lived out the parable of the grain of wheat dying in order to live, when Jesus of Nazareth, in the full bloom of young adulthood, was crucified, something decisive, something compelling, something the human race has never been able to forget or ignore, happened.

The cross is the central symbol of our faith, of course. It adorns our churches, hospitals, and health care organizations. It is perhaps the most popular item of jewelry sold today. There are crosses on gold chains, crosses of gold, silver, and wood. There are red, white, and blue crosses, crosses adorned with diamonds, crosses on rings, on pins, tie clasps. There are tattoo crosses. If you walk into the Chazen Museum on the UW campus and find the paintings from the

Renaissance, you will discover that the death of Jesus on a cross is something like the central event in the history of art.

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Part of what has been so compelling about it is the sense that it didn’t have to happen. He could have avoided it. He could have stayed in the safety of Galilee instead of going to Jerusalem for Passover. He didn’t have to go to the very place where those who hated him were prominent and powerful. He didn’t have to enter the city in a way that was provocative: riding in on a donkey in the very way the messiah was promised to come. He didn’t have to go to the temple and overturn the tables of the money changers when the soldiers arrested him. He easily could have mounted a defense in front of the secret court that tried him, easily could have argued that he meant no harm. And he could at least have tried to convince Pilate, the Roman governor, that he certainly meant no disrespect to Rome or Caesar, that he had only a few peasants for followers, unarmed. Pilate seems to have wanted to be convinced to set him free.

He did none of that. And the people who have thought much about it, the scholars, and the historians, as they have tried to pin down the reasons for his execution—how he alienated powerful people in his own religious community, how he irritated the Romans—conclude finally that a major reason for his death was his own intentionality.

If he did not mean to die, he certainly meant to live with the consistent integrity that made his death inevitable. Which is another way of saying that he really meant it when he said a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies bears much fruit; really, truly meant it when he said, “If you want to keep your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it.”

British theologian, N. T. Wright reminds us that the “crucifixion was a powerful symbol throughout the Roman world. It was not just a means of liquidating someone: it did so with a maximum of degradation and humiliation. It said, loud and clear, ‘We are in charge here: you are our property: we can do what we like with you.’”

He died, I believe, because he refused to compromise, because he honestly believed that the way to real life—eternal life, he called it—is to live for others. He died because, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s memorable phrase, he was “The Man for Others.”

He died for his people—poor, oppressed by Rome, persecuted, trampled on. He identified with them. He identified with all the nobodies of the world of all ages who are not in control of their destinies: the poor, the homeless, the weak, the powerless. Throughout human history, the poor and weak have always understood the crucifixion, perhaps better than anyone else.

He identifies with all those who know they are not in control: those whose lives and deaths are under the control of huge forces and movements. Palestinian women and children, desperate, frightened, caught in the middle of enormous geo-political forces over which they have no control. Ukrainian soldiers and pilots obeying orders, in harm’s way this morning, doing their duty, having to make precarious, instantaneous life-and-death decisions.

The critically ill in hospitals and intensive care units, no longer in control, subjected to surgeons, technicians, viruses, malignancies, chemotherapy. People who live with relentless pain, people who are sick and dying—that’s who Jesus identified with and that’s who understands him; that’s who turns to him and embrace him.

He died to show us that when our lives seem out of control for whatever reason, there is one who knows, understands, and draws us to himself. He died, I believe, to teach us how to live: to call us out of selfishness; to show us how really to live by loving passionately, by caring deeply, by giving our love, our resources to others, to causes that matter.

“We hunger, not just to be loved but to love,” Frederick Buechner once wrote. “When Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, it was not just for our neighbors’ sake, but for our sakes as well.”

And he died, I believe, to teach us not to be afraid, to show us that there is a force more powerful than death, namely the love of God, and because of that—God’s love—there is always life, right in the middle of death.

I recently read about a bright, wonderful young couple who lost their sixteen-month-old baby daughter recently. Maya was full of life, curious about everything, laughed easily and often, was affectionate and bright, and she died tragically.

In the midst of the horrible shock of their baby’s death and their overwhelming grief, they had to make an exceedingly difficult decision. Maya had been so healthy; the doctors told them that her heart and lungs were desperately needed and could be used for transplants. The couple, in their tears, thought about it—not very long actually—prayed about it, talked it over, made their decision, and agreed to allow the doctors to proceed.

A few days later at the memorial service, the sanctuary was nearly full: their friends, family, and colleagues from work. The young man and woman wanted to speak to the gathered community. Maya’s father thanked everyone for coming and thanked everyone for all their love and prayers and said that it had somehow made the past several days possible for his wife and for him.

And then Maya’s mother spoke out of her grief about her sixteen-month-old daughter who was gone, and she said that she was comforted and strengthened by the love and prayers of everyone but particularly by the thought that there were several babies who would live now and grow and be children and adolescents and adults and maybe get married and have children of their own because Maya had died.

It was a decisive moment—terrible, beautiful truth, like the moment Jesus said, “If a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it bears much fruit.”

Why did Jesus die? He died because he really believed that by living for others, we become the people God created us to be.

Amen.