

Title: A Corrective Lens
Text: John 12: 20 – 33
Date: March 18, 2018

I would like our focus today to be on our attitude towards death . . . that topic that rarely comes up in polite conversation. Before getting into that, however, there is a verse that I cannot quickly pass over.

The passage starts, **“Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.”** (v.20) We don’t know for sure whether the “Greeks” referred to were Hellenistic Jews, or Gentile seekers, or Greek converts to Judaism. What is of special interest is that they make a request to see Jesus on the way to a religious celebration, specifically Passover. Even though they probably grew up religious, right now they just want to see Jesus.

I have no idea if they were dissatisfied with the faith of their parents, or if they were indeed looking forward to another joyous Passover celebration . . . but they were *also* intensely curious about all they’d heard about Jesus. All we know is that now they just wanted an encounter with, and experience of, Jesus. We read that they came to Philip and said to him, **“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”** (v.21) They don’t come to Philip asking for information *about* Jesus. They simply want to see Jesus face to face.

Just for the record, I want you to know that I am aware that that is what many of you want too. Shepherdstown Presbyterian has the well-deserved reputation of being a progressive faith community, and that is what attracted me to you. As a progressive faith community we are intentionally welcoming of wisdom from all faith traditions. That is exciting and stimulating, but I understand that this does *not* imply that you are no longer interested in the Christian faith tradition. Maybe the old religious questions no longer have the same appeal. You grow weary of information *about* Jesus. It’s hard to explain, but there is still something within you that wants to see Jesus . . . whatever that may mean.

As your Interim Pastor I need to be reminded of that. A pastor friend of mine told me of the pulpit in a church where he served. As he climbed into the pulpit each week, those words were carved into the wood in front of him: **“We wish to see Jesus.”** I think “I get it.” Even though we are progressive in our faith, and ask different questions than we did 10 or 20 years ago, we have not shaken the fact that we are drawn to this Spirit-Man. Maybe you did not even grow up religious at all, but something has drawn you here. You may not even have questions that need to be answered. There just may be a tiny flame within that longs to be fanned. I hear you.

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OK. It might seem like I am about to make a big switch now, but I trust you’ll see how this connects

After the request of these Greeks to see Jesus, we know that Jesus responded with a rather curious statement. We read that Jesus answered, **“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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.”** (12:23-24) This shouldn’t be too hard to figure out what Jesus is getting at. If there is any question, it is resolved in verse 33 where this whole section concludes with: **“He said all this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”**

Clearly Jesus' impending death was on his mind. I think that Jesus was both preparing his disciples for what was to happen to him – so that they might make sense of it at some future point – but he was *also* modeling something for them.

Many of us are well-versed in looking at all this theologically. But while systematic theology is of interest to some, this is *not* what I want to dwell on this morning.

We frequently forget that claim of Jesus' full humanity. So humanly speaking, how many of us could be staring death in the face, and be cool enough to say, **"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."**

I think a major reason why Jesus was able to face his death so was because – as I have said from time to time – he knew exactly who he was. He knew he was **"The Beloved"** of God. He did not have any "false self" to cling to. He did not have any sense of being robbed of "his right to a full life" at age 33. He did not have any sense of disappointment that he would not live to see the launch of a new movement. He was able to let go, and simply let the grain of wheat fall into the earth and die.

I don't know if you would find this surprising or not, but personally I feel that one indicator of my "success" as a pastor is determined by my ability to help you better prepare for your own death. Not sure how well I am doing in that department, but that's my desire.

When someone finally grasps that maybe they only have two weeks left to live, let's say, I have observed many different responses. Some are filled with anxiety . . . while some have a sense of acceptance. (And I didn't say resignation.) Some are on high alert sensing they are experiencing something they are actually being drawn to.

Sometimes I feel I can help people at that time, but much more so, I have wished I could have helped them more *long before* that time. So many of these lessons are best learned *long before* your final hours.

In the language of spirituality we talk about "learning to die *before* you die." In addition to giving his disciples clues about his own death, Jesus was also trying to teach them – teach us – about the mystery of life and death. The Message translation of this passage reads: **"Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. . . . In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."** (vv. 24 – 25)

This is not just a message for the elderly in our congregation. This is a message for all of us. Henri Nouwen writes: **"Some people live long lives, some die very young. Is a long life better than a short life? What truly counts is not the length of our lives but their quality. Jesus was in his early thirties when he was killed. Thérèse of Lisieux was in her twenties when she died. Anne Frank was a teenager when she lost her life. But their short lives continue to bear fruit long after their deaths. A long life is a blessing when it is well lived and leads to gratitude, wisdom, and sanctity. But some people can live truly full lives even when their years are few."**

So how do we prepare to die? More than reading about any doctrine of the afterlife, this is a matter of spirituality, of learning to let go of our sense of entitlement . . . learning to let go of "my" life.

Wayne Muller writes, **“When you use all your strength to fight your death, you are losing all the energy you have left to live. . . . We mistakenly believe that if we accept our deaths, we will begin to die. Curiously, the reverse is true: When we accept we are already dying we are set free to live.”** This is what I mean by “learning to die before you die.”

Henri Nouwen writes, **“Am I afraid to die? I am every time I let myself be seduced by the noisy voices in my world telling me that my ‘little life’ is all I have and advising me to cling to it with all my might. But when I let these voices move to the background of my life and listen to that small soft voice calling me the Beloved, I know that there is nothing to fear and that dying is the greatest act of love, the act that leads me into the eternal embrace of my God whose love is everlasting.”**

He is using the language I was trying to teach you before. When Nouwen refers to the **“soft voice calling me the Beloved,”** that is the True Self – that is who you are in God’s eyes. When he talks about **“the noisy voices in my world telling me that my ‘little life’ is all I have,”** that is a reference to “the small self” or “the false self.”

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Looking at death through the eyes of Jesus might be just the kind of corrective lens we need. On the way to the religious festivals of Palm Sunday next week, and then Easter, may you take the time to see Jesus. And when you see Jesus, may it be more than looking at an example of stoicism. May your perspective on death be corrected by looking into the eyes of love.

Amen.

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, **"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."** 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, **"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 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. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. 27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name."** Then a voice came from heaven, **"I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."** 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, **"An angel has spoken to him."** 30 Jesus answered, **"This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."** 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.