

John 12:20-33 3.18.21 5 Lent Pastor Bill Uetricht

People have said to me on numerous occasions in the last couple of decades, “I am spiritual, but I’m not religious. The spiritual but not religious phenomenon is big in many parts of our land these days. I think we in the church would do well to pay attention to this development, rejoice in it in some ways. For me, it can be a sign that people want to go deeper. Now personally, I think that being spiritual and religious go together and that when they aren’t brought together there are some potential problems. Religion without spirituality can sometimes become formalism, going through the motions. Spirituality without religion, on the other hand, can sometimes become an exercise in self-absorption. I just need this for *me*, to help *me*, to fit *my* schedule.

But, I am convinced that this spiritual but not religious phenomenon is a sign that people are looking for something, that they are searching. Right now, I think that the pandemic has made the searching even more intense. The pandemic, with all of its suffering, its loneliness, its tendency to divide us, its ability to make us second guess just about everything we do, is making people search. And I as a religious leader rejoice in that, even though I am very aware that many people, because of the character of our culture and because of the internet, do that searching in a privatized kind of way without the assistance of some kind of community. But still, the good news is that many people are searching. What I as a leader am all about is helping people in their search.

Our gospel reading for today brings us some searchers, seekers. “Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.” We can’t be fully certain who the Greeks are here. I suspect that they are likely to be non-Jewish people who don’t practice Judaism, but who are coming to the festival, nonetheless. Maybe these

Greeks are the spiritual but not religious sort. I don't know. Clearly, they are people who are searching.

And we find out what is the focus of their search. Going to the disciple Philip, whose name is a Greek name by the way, they say: "Sir, we want to see Jesus." The search is for Jesus. We in the church need to see this. People are looking for Jesus. The search that people have, even if sometimes they don't know it, is for the deeper thing. While we can give them really good green Jello at the best potlucks, and polished youth programs, and trendy or ancient music, their search is for something much deeper, something we name Jesus.

In response to the request to see Jesus, Philip communicates with Andrew, another man with a Greek name. Following that, Andrew and Philip speak to Jesus about these Greeks and their requests. This is a typical pattern in the Gospel of John: one person tells another who then tells another. This is the way it works in the church. This is how the church grows. One person speaks to another who speaks then to another. We testify to one another, focusing our testimony eventually on the one named Jesus.

Now when Jesus gets the word about the presence of these Greeks, he starts to talk, maybe teach. We can't tell for sure whether he is speaking directly to the Greeks, but I like to think of the Greeks listening in on the conversation. Their arrival on the scene is extremely important for the Gospel of John, for now, at least in Jewish imagination, the whole world is present. The whole world in Jewish imagination includes Jews and everybody else.

The "everybody else" are now present. And their presence means that the mission of Jesus is about to reach its climax. He is about to die. And for John, this is the moment of great glory. This is so different from the gospel of Mark. In Mark, the cross is a matter of utter abandonment. In John, the cross is glory. In John, Jesus is not

abandoned. He is in complete control. In today's reading, we experience that control when the crowds hear a voice from heaven and he says: "This voice has come for you, not for me." I know what I am up to; you now need to know.

It seems to me that what Jesus is talking about is somewhat stark for some folks who are just searching. I suspect that Jesus didn't take very many psychology classes at the university. If he had, he might have learned that in taking people to some place new, you start slow. But that's not what Jesus did. He starts by telling his listeners that he must die: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." The notion is that the grain dies as it is buried in the ground. Until it is buried, it won't bear great fruit. The reference is primarily to himself. He is going to have to die so that much fruit can be produced.

By the way, searchers, I don't think that simply applies to Jesus. If you want real life—John calls it "eternal life"—you will also have to die. Self-centered, self-preoccupied, self-saturated lives may feel like life, but ultimately will be death. They must die in order that real fruit can come forth.

But Jesus' words, while dealing with them are primarily about *him*. His talk today is about *his* death, *his* moment of glory, what he calls the hour of the "judgment of this world," the hour when "the ruler of this world [is] driven out." What do the seekers find when they encounter Jesus? Why is the cross, an instrument of torture, the moment of great glory for Jesus?

Here's the deal. For John, the cross is glory because in the cross God's great, sacrificial love is lifted high, for the world to see, Jews and Greeks alike. If you are a searcher, what you are going to find in Jesus, and, I hope, in those who name his name, is a love that welcomes you and everybody else. Maybe that is why the Greeks are trying to find

Jesus in the first place. Maybe they sensed that in him is to be found the love of God that is like a huge magnet that draws the whole world unto him. We're searching because we are being drawn. We're searching because we are being searched for. Love is after us—all of us—to bring us to love and to make us into one family. If what you have found is not love, if what you have found divides you from people, leaves all kinds of people out, you have not found Jesus.

Actually, to find Jesus or to be found by him, as I prefer to say it, is to be taken to the place where your lack of love has the light shine on it, to be taken to what John calls *judgment*. "Now, [i.e., the time of the cross], is the judgment of this world." Judgment is not about going to hell when you die. The Greek word for judgment is "krisis," from which we get the word "crisis." Searchers, if you are looking for Jesus, get ready for a crisis. The love that is lifted high on the cross will not allow you to live a life of stingy love. It won't allow you not to be changed. And it won't allow you to be content with the way things are, the way the world values and operates, with the world's structures. "Now [as Jesus will die on the cross], the ruler of this world [the structures of the world] will be driven out."

The cross, when it is lifted up for the whole world to see, reveals what the structures of the world are like, what runs the world. The cross is a like a giant mirror, or for me lately, like a video from which you cannot hide.

One of the hard things about the pandemic for me has been having to see myself on video. Ugh!! But oh, it's been helpful. When you can't see yourself, you often don't change. You just keep repeating the same bad behaviors. The cross helps us see ourselves. The cross reveals a world that is structured not to reflect the love of God. The cross tells us what kind of values the world operates under. The cross reveals what we do to love. The cross unveils our racism, our hatred

for the different, our rejection even of ourselves. The cross creates a crisis for us, a crisis we are about ready to enter as we prepare for Holy Week.

Searchers, this is where Jesus will take us. You may not want to go there. I know many times I don't want to go there. I just want to remain the same. But the cross will not allow us because love won't allow us to stay the same. There is an easier route, I realize. But it's not the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is the way of God met in the cross. This is the route to glory. It's the deeper way. The world and its structures will take you the easier way. They may even make sure that you avoid crisis, but that is not where you really want to go. Love is after you. True, cross-highly-lifted-up love is seeking you. Let it take you where it needs to. And I am going to bet that where it will take you is what you have been looking for all along.