

## Would You Like To See Jesus?

John 12:20-33

Several years ago a friend invited me to speak in the church he was serving. When I stepped into the pulpit and began to turn to my text, I saw these words printed on the desk just above the top of the Bible: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” After the service I asked my friend why he had chosen to put that line on the pulpit. This is what he said: “When I stand to preach, I like to imagine that that is what people in the congregation are saying. I want to remember that they have come to hear the gospel. My task is to present Jesus Christ to them. I am not called to entertain the congregation or to feed my own ego. I am to try to help people see Jesus.”

A preacher who is serious about his work does not forget something like that. Quite often when I am trying to decide what to preach about or how to make a presentation, I think of that comment: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” That never fails to give me focus.

It’s a rather simple comment on the surface. But it came from an interesting source at a crucial time in the ministry of Jesus. It was shortly after Jesus’ royal entry into Jerusalem. The city was thronged with pilgrims preparing to observe the festival of Passover. If you combine the other gospel accounts with this one in John, you get a full picture of a dramatic event.

After his ride into Jerusalem on the donkey, Jesus went to the temple. There were people everywhere. Jesus came to the outer court of the temple, the Court of the Gentiles, and attacked those who changed money and who sold pigeons and animals for sacrifice. You remember his strong words: “It is written; My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers” (Mt. 21:13).

The ruckus in the temple had both negative and positive repercussions. The religious leaders decided that something would have to be done with this brash teacher from Galilee. They withdrew to hatch some strategy to eliminate him. On the positive side, honest seekers after truth felt that they must learn more about Jesus.

A group of Greek pilgrims was in Jerusalem for the feast. These Greeks might have been “God-fearers”—proselytes to Judaism. There were many such persons. They might simply have been religious junkies. In the ancient world Greeks were known for their curiosity and their wanderlust. Greeks were the first “tourists.” The Greek mind was also deeply religious. Throughout Greece there were temples and

shrines to the gods. In Athens Paul found a statue dedicated “To an Unknown God.” It was not uncommon for Greek travelers to be in Jerusalem at Passover time.

Greek visitors were welcome in the city and the temple mount. Proselytes or not, they were Gentiles and were allowed no further than the Court of the Gentiles. Perhaps the members of this group witnessed what Jesus did and said to the merchants. They wanted to know more. They asked around until they found one of Jesus’ disciples. It’s interesting that they approached Philip who had a Greek name and who hailed from the non-Jewish town of Bethsaida.

I hope you sense the significance of this scene. The writer of John’s gospel tells the story many years after the fact. He wants to show that the Christian gospel is for all persons. He recalls the Greek pilgrims and their poignant request: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” There is a slight touch of humor here as well. Even though Philip had been with Jesus for almost three years, he still seemed uncomfortable bringing Gentiles to Jesus. He had heard Jesus say to the Syrophenician woman, also a Greek, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24). So Philip enlisted the help of Andrew, and Andrew brought the foreigners to Jesus.

Jesus was deeply moved. The Greek inquirers reassured him of his mission. Even his disciples were wondering about Jesus’ wisdom, if not his sanity. But these outsiders were not repelled; they were attracted to his actions and words. With relief, maybe even exaltation, Jesus sighed, “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.”

“We would like to see Jesus.” Is that not what our lives, if not our lips, are asking? You would think people today are looking for almost everything else. Very seldom does anyone come to the church and say, “Tell me about Jesus.” I can’t remember that last time I heard anything close to that. Yet I hear the plea for Jesus in other ways—in expressions of need for love and acceptance, in the selfish and greedy desire to fill up life with whatever is available, even in words of resentment and spite. The request of the Greeks is our request: “We would like to see Jesus.”

Why do we have so much trouble voicing that need and seeking to fill it? Maybe the best answer to that question lies in a parable. Once upon a time there was a man who set out to find the meaning of life. First, he read everything he could get his hands on—history, philosophy, psychology, and religion. He became well informed, but nothing gave him the solution he sought. Next, he looked for the right spiritual adviser.

He discovered great teachers, but their systems left him wanting more. Finally, he stored his belongings and set off to search the world over for “the meaning of life.”

In India this seeker after truth was told of a holy man who lived deep in the Himalayas. Without hesitation he set out to find him. He found the hut of the holy man and knocked at the door. A kind-looking old man opened the door and asked him to come in. The pilgrim blurted out his questions: “Why are we here? What is really important? What is the meaning of life?” “Please come in and have some tea,” the old man said. “I don’t want tea,” the visitor replied, “I came to find answers to my questions.” “We shall have tea,” the host said, so the man came inside.

While the holy man was brewing the tea, his guest began talking about all the books he had read, the teachers he had consulted, and the places he had seen. He could not stop, so the old man placed a cup into his hands and began pouring tea. The man was so busy talking that he did not notice when the cup was full. The older man kept pouring until tea went over the rim of the cup and onto the floor in a steaming waterfall. Then the man noticed. “What are you doing?” he shouted. “The cup is full. Can’t you see that? Stop! There’s no more room.” “Ah, just so,” the holy man said. “You came here wanting something from me, but what can I do? There’s no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and we will talk.

Ever wonder why it seems that we are so spiritually impoverished today? The problem is not with the gospel. Grace is still sufficient. Jesus still saves! The difficulty lies in our ability to receive.

Jesus’ response seems harsh. Every time I read this story I try to imagine how the Greek pilgrims felt and how the disciples themselves felt. Instead of giving some cozy, vague, self-affirming guideline for living, Jesus said starkly that the way to keep your life is to give it away and that the way to find meaning is through service. The line that goes “they who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it” occurs six times in the gospels. It is one of the best-attested statements of Jesus that we have.

Perhaps we should not shake our heads at the harshness of these words but look gratefully at their honesty. They point to the way of a rich, full, meaningful life. My guess is that the Greeks accepted that readily. They were not in Jerusalem for pleasure. They had probably traveled extensively consulting philosophical teachers and had read widely in the literature of the day. To minds and hearts exhausted in the search for truth, the statements of Jesus came like the gentle warmth of spring.

How many ways can we say it today? We need to awaken to reality. True life requires a change of mind and heart. Wholeness comes when God is at the center of life. Trust in God's goodness is our only hope. Life comes through death to selfishness.

Nothing has changed those realities. By giving life away we keep it. We are driven by a need for acceptance and security. We crave these things so much that we spend most of our time and energy seeking them. Some have already learned the truth that seeking acceptance and security is the surest way of not finding them. However, by receiving the acceptance and security that God gives we never even think of the question.

That's the meaning of life, Jesus said to the Greeks. Just days before his death! Sometimes when we are empty of diversions, distractions, and delusional thoughts, we recognize that Jesus was right. We decide and we act. In a way discipleship is making that decision over and over. Decision, for me, is not a once-for-all thing. A basic commitment, I think, is deciding for Christ each day and in each new situation. We are faced with who he is, what he does, and what he expects, and we ask: Would we like to see Jesus?

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