

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus”

John 12:20-36

Preached from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Fourth Sunday in the Season of Lent, 18 March 2018
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Some Greeks came to Philip and asked, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Most of you know that many pulpits have a plaque on the preacher-side. Some pulpits are dedicated in honor of a founding pastor. Some have a biblical quotation. The pulpit in my home church in Hampton had an inscription written in Greek. Translated, John chapter 12, the later words of verse 21: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

They are interesting words. Raymond Brown suggests that the words “to see” may have a sense of “to visit with, to meet” or, even, “to believe in.” Interesting words, indeed.

It might be sacrilegious to suggest this, but I wonder, if given the opportunity in flesh and blood, would folk in our churches relish the opportunity to visit with Jesus? *Really?*

I picture Jesus as a friendly, winsome person. But part of me—if I’m honest—is wary of meeting Jesus. Why? It’s because Jesus has some hard words for all of us about discipleship. Words that I think many of us don’t want to hear and many more of us (me included) don’t want to follow.

Jesus says, for example, to forgive those who wrong you not seven times but seven times seventy. I have trouble forgiving once, much less seven times seventy. Jesus says love God with everything you’ve got. Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus defines my neighbor as people I don’t even like. The demands of discipleship are great. And, truth be told, I’m not very good at walking the walk.

Do we really want to see Jesus? Did those hapless Greek men and women really know what they were getting themselves into? Do they know what relationship with Jesus is like?

I love the poetry of Shel Silverstein. He writes poems for kids and their grown-ups. He’s on my level. He wrote this poem called “God’s Wheel” and in it a little boy likes the idea of being one of God’s helpers. Here it goes:

God says to me with kind of a smile,
“Hey how would you like to be God awhile
And steer the world?”
“Okay,” says I, “I’ll give it a try.
Where do I set?
How much do I get?
What time is lunch?
When can I quit?”
“Gimme back that wheel,” says God,
“I don’t think you’re quite ready yet.”¹

That kid is a lot like me. I’m really not ready yet to do God’s work. Sure, I want the benefits, the power. Yes, I’m ready for my lunch break. I’m very much like those disciples arguing with one another about who

¹ [A Light in the Attic](#) poems and drawings by Shel Silverstein, Harper, 1981.

gets to sit where in the kingdom of heaven. I want the front row seats. But that's not the kind of devotion God is looking for in me—or in any of us.

Do I really want to chat awhile with Jesus? Do I really want to come face to face with God's light, with God's truth, in Jesus' holy smile?

Do I?

Jack Nicholson is one of my favorite actors. Remember the scene from the schmaltzy movie "A Few Good Men?" Nicholson is on the stand and Tom Cruise is the JAG lawyer trying to nail him. Nicholson snarls at Tom Cruise in this heated courtroom exchange, "What do you want from me?"

Tom Cruise shouts, "I want the truth."

Jack Nicholson sneers, as only Jack Nicholson can, "Son, you can't handle the truth!"

I'm not sure I can handle the truth of Jesus Christ, are you? This man I'm called to love says here in John's Gospel that he's going to die soon. Right from the beginning I know this is going to be a relationship that is going to hurt. Jesus talks about a grain of wheat. It does not bear fruit unless it dies in the ground and then, by God's grace, it grows.

Jesus says that if I love my life I'm sure enough going to lose it. He's telling me that I can't love anything—father, mother, wife, child, or life itself—more than I love God. And then he invites me to follow. Follow me, Jesus says. In other places in the Gospel he likens my discipleship to carrying a cross. What does he say? *Take up your cross, and follow me.*

Did the Greeks know what they were asking? Do we?

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

* * *

"... 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."

More than once in the scriptures we find Jesus asking his father to save him. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, "Father, save me from this hour"?"

No. He took the betrayal with a kiss. He heard the jeers. He withstood the trial. He took the travesty of justice, he took the fear, he took the cross up that hill, and died. He died.

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!*

Like that grain of wheat, Jesus would die *and* rise again. He went a long, long way to show us God's love. And that kind of love is like a magnet draws me in. I don't understand the cross and the sacrifice made there . . .

*I am a stranger to God's way divine,
How heaven's high and earth's low should intertwine²*

² This is a snippet from a poem by someone famous; I cannot remember who, and I quote it often.

... I don't understand that kind of love. But I understand enough to follow. Like you and billions of saints before us all, I want to follow God in the footsteps of Jesus. No, I'm not a good leader and I'm a poorer follower. But Jesus invites me to follow, and, yes, I want to follow. I want to try, and to fail, and to try again. By God's grace, I want to follow.

And I want you to follow with me. Let's hold hands. Let's equip ourselves with stories, and fried chicken, and songs. Let's follow together. Let's follow bravely. Let's follow humbly. Let's follow expectantly. Trusting God, let's follow Jesus together.

Like you, I couldn't say no if I wanted to. By God's grace yes. "Sir, I do, really I do, wish to see Jesus."

And by God's grace I want to follow wherever he leads.

IN THE NAME OF GOD THE CREATOR, GOD THE SON, AND GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN.

John 12:20-33 ²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever 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. ²⁸Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.