

*Fifth Sunday in Lent*

March 18, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 12: 20-33)

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"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. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A while back, about a year ago, I was on a retreat with ninth-graders, and I asked them to make a list of all the things we talk about at church. You know, the stuff we say over and over again about God and about how to live this life. Things like: "You are a child of God," or "You are the beloved," or "Love your enemies," or "Forgive seventy times seven." You know the things I mean, so work with me here. What is it we always say at church? Oh, come on. "Amen." "Peace." Okay. They came up with a much longer list, so I need to be clear on that.

Back to the retreat. I asked these ninth-graders to imagine themselves in the middle of a day at school, and I said, "Do these things apply at school?" "Can you live like this at school? Love your enemies. Forgive seventy times seven. Give of yourself." They laughed at me. "What? No! You can't do that stuff at school!" They laughed.

It is not easy to live a Christian life in the world. It is not easy to believe the things we say here, and trust that the Holy Spirit is out there when we're out there. It is not easy to see and live into this reign of God that is calling us to love abundantly, to forgive extravagantly, to give myself away for the sake of others. They laughed.

Life is complicated. "The last being first" - how can that even happen? If I'm supposed to forgive seventy times seven, I'm going to get eaten alive. If I'm supposed to love my enemies, does that mean my business competitors? It's all well and good to talk about the things Jesus says and does when we're here, in the midst of candles and organ music. But at work? At school? On the golf course? At the office party? That's funny.

However, however, we are also thoughtful, caring, Christian people. We take the call of Christ seriously. So when we hear Christ's call to follow, we feel torn. It's easy to feel trapped in culture and systems, enmeshed in old wrongs and assumptions that stifle us. We feel torn by hurt, and guilt, and habits, and fears that hold us bound. We ache for a new way to be in this world. We ache for this life to be better for everyone. More gentle, or hopeful, or at least caring and respectful. But how? We don't see a way, or we can't make it happen, or the cost is too high. So we laugh. "It can't be done."

The Bible is not unsympathetic to our plight. It understands the cycles we get caught into, systemic wrong, aching for a better world. It understands not knowing how or not being able to live this life that God calls us to.

Take, for instance, Psalm 51. We sang Psalm 51 this morning. It is attributed to David, King of Israel; chosen by God to be the giant slayer, the skilled warrior who united a kingdom. But one day David stayed home from battle, and he looked out his window over the rooftops.

The man who was supposed to be the model of living a godly life, who was supposed to know how to lead and forgive and give himself away, this man fell. He forced himself on a married woman; and then, to cover it up, he had her husband killed.

Psalm 51 is the prayer of a man whose life is a mess. He doesn't know how to fix it, how to get through, how to be forgiven, how to make it better. The whole world is wrong, and he is aching for a new start. He is in a place that feels like death, and he is crying for new life.

*"Create in me a clean heart," he says, "and put a new spirit within me." "Cast me not away from your presence." "Do not take your spirit from me." "Restore me, uphold me, deliver me."*

These are the words of a man whose life is a mess, and he does the most powerful thing he can do. The most powerful thing he can do. He opens himself up to God. He lays himself bare. He turns himself utterly over to the power of God to give life.

Our brothers and sisters in Alcoholics Anonymous understand this. They well know the first two steps. Number one: "I am powerless over alcohol, and my life has become unmanageable." And, number two: "I believe that a power greater than myself can restore me to sanity." "I am powerless, life is unmanageable, and there is a power greater that can restore me." These brothers and sisters understand letting go and letting God bring newness to them. They can also tell you how hard it is to admit powerlessness and turn to God empty-handed for help. It is a lot like death.

I wonder if we could pray in our own lives and for our own world, "*Create in us clean hearts, O God.*" "*Put new spirit in us.*" Could we be honest about what our lives and our world have become? I wonder if we can look at the world God wants for us, and instead of laughing, to empty ourselves into the power of God for newness. Could we ask God to work something new in us and in this world? Could we trust in God's power to change and lead us into it? I wonder.

But – but – but that all sounds great. But look at this world! Children are gunned down. People with brown and black skin are abused. We are living once again under the threat of nuclear clouds. The earth itself is crying for redemption. Shouldn't we be doing something right now? Marching, or phone calling, or eating vegetarian, or doing something? How can we let pain happen? Shouldn't we make a difference? How can we sit still when the world is a wreck?

We want to go out and save the world this afternoon, but we can't. We are God's children, not God's messiah. We can only place our lives in God's creative, redemptive power, and do the work God places before each of us today. The work that God places before each of us today. Work that may seem inconsequential. That small conversation that you feel like you really have to have. That opportunity that bubbles up right in front of you.

If we are depending on God to redeem this world, we can only do those things God places in front of us right now, which may not seem like a lot. And, yes, it will feel a little bit like dying – to not be in charge, or make a big splash, or feel like we're making a difference, or act out of power or anger. To not see immediate success. To listen, and to love, to try and fail, to do what I can today. It will feel small. It's a seed that is dying. But, if a seed dies, it will bear much fruit.

In 1979, remembering the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero, Father Ken Untener wrote:

"It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that can be said. No prayer of faith fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives include everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way; an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

A year and a half ago, I asked ninth-graders to list all the things we talk about at church. Then I said, "Think about your day at school. Can you live like this?" And they laughed. They laughed, because I asked the wrong question. I should have asked, "Can you let God work in you?"

And what is the one thing God is asking you to do today? What small seed are you asked to plant?

Amen.