

Sermon for March 21, 2021

John 12: 20-33

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For whatever reason, this week I found myself thinking about my old pastor from college – this giant in the Presbyterian world who served at Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Rev. Steve Montgomery was one of the most gentle and kind ministers you could come across. A powerful preacher who brought a prophetic word, he built coalitions and worked in the Memphis community for justice and equity and served this powerfully impressive tall-steeple church which rested right in the heart of Midtown Memphis. He was as comfortable speaking with the powerful elite in the city as he was breaking bread with its homeless population.

I'll never forget how, on the Sunday following the death of Rev. Fred Rogers, or just "Mister Rogers" as most know him, Steve came before this huge congregation within this massive gothic sanctuary, and as he approached the pulpit to preach, he first took off his robe and stole and he reached for a cardigan to put over his arms. Then he slipped off his fancy Sunday shoes and sat down in this ornate wooden chair to put on some sneakers and to carefully tie its shoelaces. He then came to the pulpit and softly, kindly sang "It's you I like. It's not the clothes you wear. It's not the ribbons in your hair but its you I like." A song from Mr. Roger's Neighborhood. A memory that, perhaps, came to me on this weekend, which our denomination has designated in honor of Mr. Roger's.

But it turns out, that's not what made me think of Rev. Montgomery this week. No, this week it was that request the Greek's brought to Phillip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Last summer, just 15 months into his newfound life in retirement, Rev. Montgomery was out riding his bike through the streets of Memphis. A new hobby he had taken up in retirement. This particular night he had taken off for his ride without his wallet – no identification, no phone. And at an intersection where he should have turned right, he decided last-minute to turn left, putting him right in the path of an oncoming car. It was a horrible accident, and the poor man driving the car fell to the ground to care for this stranger on the street before him. The man looked for identification but could not find any. He looked for a phone so that he could call the man's family, but he found nothing. So after calling the police to report the accident, the driver of the car simply laid beside this stranger – talking to him, singing to him, praying with him. He had no idea he was caring for one of the kindest, most loving men in that city. But I like to think that some of Rev. Montgomery's final memories were of a man – perhaps even the presence of Christ - caring for him through the soft words and gentle prayers of a stranger who laid beside him.

How can we see Christ in our world today?

The Greeks in today's reading from the Gospel of John wanted to see Jesus. They wanted to know about this man who was gaining a reputation and causing a stir. So, they played a Biblical version of telephone where first they tell Philipp and then Philipp tells Andrew, and then Andrew tells Jesus. And their desire – their request to see Jesus – sets the stage for Jesus' final act of public ministry – his final lesson, complete a passion description and a holy conversation between Jesus and God's voice from the heavens. All because of a simple request,

*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*

There is actually a long tradition of pastors taping these very words on the inside of pulpits. So that, no matter what manuscripts they may bring for their sermons or announcements they need to share or any other “stuff” that might get in between The Spirit and the speaker, they remember first and foremost their task: to show people Jesus.

But how can people see Christ in our world today? How can people see Christ in our church today?

In response to the Greek’s request, Jesus begins to describe how by falling into the earth and dying, a grain of wheat is able to produce much fruit. For, he says, if it does not fall to the earth and die, it remains but a single grain. But if it dies, Jesus says, then it can truly grow. Then it can truly live.

His words anticipate what will soon come in his own life. His dying. His rising. But more than that, they are words meant to encourage the would-be followers around him. Reminding them that by holding too tightly to our lives, we lose them, and it is by letting go of our lives that we enter into life most profoundly.

Jesus says, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.”

So, if one comes desiring to see Jesus, it would follow that to know him, one should simply look to the fruit. Look to what has grown from the grain of wheat that fell to the ground. Look to the followers who seek to serve, look to the faithful who have set aside their own lives in favor of the Kingdom of Heaven.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” they say. So where is the fruit that we can point them to?

In the chapters following this one, in John, Jesus will flesh this idea out even more for his disciples. Following this last public teaching in his ministry, he will tell his disciples privately about what all of his life ministry and his life has been about. About what all of these signs and teachings have meant. But what we will find is that Jesus’ Farewell Discourse will have less to do with explaining the function of Jesus’ death as it will with encouraging the disciples about their responsibility after he has gone. Rev. Karoline Lewis writes that today’s passage connects with Jesus’ final words, where he encourages the disciples in their discipleship, reminding them that to serve him, to follow him, means to do the works that he did, to feed and tend his sheep, to love one another.

So much of this narrative in John about Jesus’ death connects to what will become of the disciples after Jesus has gone. What will become of the fruit after Jesus – that grain of wheat – has fallen. How will people see Jesus when, just a few verses after their request, we hear that Jesus will die?

Where will Jesus be found by the seekers longing to find him?

Among his followers? Among the church?

Sir, we wish to see Jesus. It’s a longing that echoes as much in our “spiritual but not religious” world of today as it did so long ago. And in response to it, we – the church - must ask ourselves, are we showing people Jesus? Are we showing people Jesus – we the people who claim to love him and follow him? We the ones who build churches in his honor and sing hymns in his praise. Are we showing people Jesus? Does our worship help the curious to know him? Do our mission statements echo with his words? Do our communities embody the Good News we are called to bear?

Or, like that grain of wheat, do we reserve the version of Jesus we prefer to tell rather than the one we are called to show? I have thought, these past days, about how Christians have shown Jesus to our world of late. How Christians have gotten wrapped up in conspiracy theories and waved

Christian flags in the midst of an insurrection. How churches have continued to teach the importance of “moral purity” while remaining comfortable with weapons of power and ideologies of hate. And how whole swaths of our population continue to be told by the church of Jesus that they are not acceptable because of who they love or how they identify themselves.

Is this the presence of Christ in our world today?

Perhaps it is not surprising that right after speaking about how his death will inevitably place the continuation of his work in human hands, Jesus then says, “now my soul is troubled”. We hear in his words an awareness that the time has come. Here on this fifth Sunday of Lent, we know where this is headed. Jesus has just named it aloud and, with these words, speaks it to himself. He continues, “and what shall I say, ‘Father deliver me from this hour’? No.” Jesus, at least in this Gospel, is resolved. He knows the path before him, and while he may not pretend to be happy about it, he does not ask for deliverance. He knows the kind of self-giving love he is called to.

And so, my friends, do we. We know the Jesus we are called to share with this world. The Jesus who takes the path of nonresistance in the face of death. The Jesus who heals and teaches, yes, but the Jesus also who reaches out to the outcast and pours out grace upon the forgotten. The Jesus who challenges misguided leadership and who proclaims a new kingdom in the face of a corrupt world.

This is the Jesus we are called to show to this world. In every word we speak and song we sing and activity we plan. We are called to show Jesus.

Perhaps that is fundamentally what this Matthew 25 movement in our denomination is trying to help us do. To focus everything we do toward showing Jesus in this world. Not the Jesus who took the easy way – the Jesus we make in our own image. But the Jesus who stands with the least of these, who will sit at table with the outcasts, who will lay down his life beside a stranger on the road.

How, my friends, are we showing this Jesus to the world?

This fifth Sunday of Lent, may we sit with this question. May we allow it to challenge us and disquiet us. May we allow it to move us and inspire us. And, with the Spirit’s help, may it embolden us to live – really live – as living fruit, as followers of Christ, as those who would show Jesus to this hurting world.

Friends in Christ, may it be so. Amen.