

John 12:20-33, We want to see Jesus, March 2018

Let's just take a moment to think about the furnishings in our chancel area. Our *what* area, you ask? To refresh your memories, the largest area in which the congregation sits in any church is called the nave. The *chancel* area is the area around the altar. And within the chancel area, there are certain essential elements. You will see these basic items in most any church you visit, but they may look quite different or be arranged quite differently. We have the table of the Lord, which we call the altar, back against the wall. We have an altar rail, circular in design, with the other half of the railing around the world and in heaven, as we have pondered before. You also see the podium at which I am standing; for us this functions both as the lectern—the stand from which the lessons are read; and the pulpit—the stand from which the sermon is preached. Some churches have two separate pieces of furniture for lectern and pulpit; some have one, like we do; some have none. In some churches the lessons are read and the sermon preached without the benefit of a podium. Which is a stark contrast to the preaching pulpits in old, traditional sanctuaries. If you've traveled to older cathedral style churches, in our country or abroad, you have likely seen massive pulpits, set up a number of steps, and sometimes having a large sounding board above and behind them. This, of course, accommodated worship in an era without sound systems and allowed the maximum number of congregants standing in the nave area—and they did stand, not sit—to both see and hear the preacher. I have been so bold as to walk up and into some of these pulpits, when visiting other churches, and certainly one feels a sense of gravitas as one imagines preaching from such a position. Even standing up here to preach or proclaim, as those of you who have filled in for preaching might know, can make a bit of an impression on the speaker or preacher. A sense of responsibility and significance perhaps. That what is said here matters. I love this pulpit! But, if it could be improved upon, it might be

in this way; in numerous pulpits all around the world, there is a verse carved into the pulpit on the side facing the preacher, as an instruction and a reminder to that preacher. And that verse comes from our lesson today, John 12:21: “We want to see Jesus” . That verse is to serve as a continual reminder to the one preaching as to the purpose of their proclamation: to assist others in seeing Jesus. Not just sharing information about Jesus or about Scripture or about God, but the experience of seeing Jesus, of encountering Jesus. That is the goal of Christian proclamation—to assist in the opening of hearts and minds to see Jesus.

That request in our lesson today comes, significantly, from the *Greeks*. Why does that matter? Within the Gospel of John we hear of Jesus and his disciples attending 3 Passover festivals in Jerusalem. Our lesson today is set at one of those festivals, and Jerusalem was a large enough and cosmopolitan enough city within the Roman empire to have citizens and visitors of varied nationalities. It is significant that it is not *Jews* who approach Philip in our lesson, looking for an introduction to Jesus, but *Greeks*. Not Jews. Not one of the chosen people. But rather people of the larger world, who nevertheless, are spiritual seekers. In some ways, this story might remind us of the visit of the Magi to the Christ child which we hear of at Christmas and Epiphany. The magi are the way in which we enter into that story of Christ’s birth---because the Magi are likely Persians, and are not Jews but Gentiles---which is who we are. Likewise, these Greeks become the way we enter into *this* story. Because they, like us, are Gentiles and not Jews. And yet, they want to see Jesus. And so do we. And just as the positioning of the magi in that Christmas story stands as evidence that Christ is for all people, not just the Jewish people, so also the curiosity of these Greeks and their encounter with Jesus demonstrates the same thing. God’s plan for salvation is for the *world*, not just one small people within it. As our lesson from John last Sunday declared in that so familiar verse, John 3:16—

God so loved the *world*, that God sent the Son. God is thinking big in the coming of Christ, and that all- embracing inclusion of the whole world, no exceptions, includes even us, Gentiles on the North shore of Lake Superior in the Year of our Lord, 2018. Like these Greeks so long ago, we wish to see Jesus.

But how can and will we see Jesus, so long after the fact? Thousands of years and half a world away, completely different language and culture---*how* can we see Jesus? I do believe we *want* to. I think that's why we're here. I mean, I know we're here because we enjoy each other or we like the music or the participation in community starts our week out right. I get that! But, I think that far more fundamentally than that, maybe more than we even realize, we come because we wish to see Jesus. We are hungry for an encounter with the Living God. We are listening, looking, on the prowl for a sign that God is among us, loves us, knows us, hears us. That's why we're church, and not some other civic or community organization. Other groups are often so positive and purposeful and helpful in building up community and serving the common good, but this is *our* distinguishing hallmark: we are showing Jesus to the world. We are living out Christ to our community. And in order to do that, we first need to see Jesus *ourselves*.

There are many ways as Christians and church goers that we look for Jesus. The Scriptures, the stories about Jesus which we teach to our children in Children's Church and ponder ourselves as adults in our lessons are certainly a crucial way. If you could somehow go back in time to the origin of those ancient lessons, which story would you enter into? Would you want to see Jesus embracing the children? Or fishing with his disciples? Or multiplying loaves and fishes? Or healing the blind man? Or sharing a meal with his friends? Or picking wildflowers and pointing out the birds of the air? Which story would you enter into? These stories help us to see Jesus.

But it's not just the Scripture Lessons that open our eyes to see Jesus. The hymns which we sing every week also speak to us of Jesus. Both the very ancient hymns---like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel" from the 6th C.. Or the newer hymns like "Shine, Jesus, Shine, fill this land with the Father's Glory" from the end of the last century , or the traditional Gospel hymns like "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" from 2 centuries ago, or all the hymns in between. I love the hymn we'll sing when I stop talking at you, "Lord of All Hopefulness," because it paints such a vivid picture of Jesus in his daily life---working with his hands, healing, listening, embracing. Pay attention as we sing it, and you'll see what I mean.

And of course, we also see *Jesus literally*, in the visual images we have around us in church. I chose the bulletin cover for today, because how often do we see Jesus in his work as a carpenter, work that many still do to this day? And our altar painting portraying a Jesus with open arms, welcoming all who seek him, like these Greeks in our lesson. The banners, the art in our hymnal, the symbols all around us; these all help us to see Jesus.

Arguably, we can even taste Jesus, at least symbolically. What about when we receive Holy Communion, the body and blood of our Lord, as we do each week? A pastor friend shared about a young child receiving her first communion, who said afterwards, "Jesus tastes good." What's wrong with that? "Taste and see that the Lord is good", we read in the Psalms. We taste Jesus in this Holy Sacrament, His body joined to our body. These are some of the ways we see Jesus. As well as seeing him in each other, as we gather together! We know each other's joys and sorrows, and as we support one another, we see Jesus!

But, as I thought about where I saw Jesus in this past week, three examples outside of these walls came to my mind. I'll share them briefly, to stimulate your own thoughts on where you see Jesus, both in this church and outside it. One place I saw Jesus was at my clergy

conference meeting last Tuesday. We had a lovely young woman speak to us about issues between Palestinians and Israelis. She had lived in Palestine for a year as part of our Lutheran Churches' Yagum program---Yagum standing for Young Adults in Global Ministries. It's a magnificent program, which places young adults, as volunteers, around the world in an assortment of positions in which they offer service and simply listen and learn. This young woman taught in a school and lived with a Christian Palestinian family. She told us, so sadly, that no one is free in the Holy Land. Israelis are burdened with fear, and Palestinians are burdened with oppression. She also showed us pictures of the family with which she lived, including her foster Mom for the year, who greeted this young woman by saying, "I have loved you since I first heard you'd be coming to stay with us. I am so excited you're here." In that welcoming love and generosity of that foster Mom and in the courage and witness of this young woman, I saw Jesus.

On the Saturday before that, I was in Madison, with Phil, visiting our daughter and her fiancé. Madison had just a couple of inches of snow and is about 10-15 degrees warmer than we are, typically. Which means that as we walked along, I was stunned to see crocuses pushing out of the mud and through that inch or so of snow, growing up towards the nearly spring sunshine. I thought of the Easter hymn, "Now the green blade rises from the field of grain. Love comes again that with the dead has been. Love is come again, like wheat arising green." This wasn't wheat, but it was a green blade rising, and it spoke to me of new life and spring and resurrection, and I saw Jesus in those crocuses.

Finally, I saw Jesus in several care center visits I made in the past week and a half. I try to visit our shut ins monthly, and at present, most are in care centers of one sort or another. Now let's be honest here; care centers, aka nursing homes, are not always the places we want to be. In

fact, they can frankly be downright depressing. And there is no one I respect more in this world than those who work and live in these facilities and somehow retain a sense of caring, joy, and humor. In one visit, a young man who works as a CNA went out of his way to locate the man I was seeking, to wheel him to a private corner where we could share conversation and communion, and to converse cheerfully with the man and myself about whether or not Kirk Cousins was a good choice for the Vikings at quarterback. Oh alright---I admit I brought up the subject first, but only because both the man I was visiting and the young man working there were wearing Viking's jerseys. Really. But that young man didn't have to know where my parishioner was, or go out of his way to assist him and me, or join in friendly conversation. Similarly, in a visit in another care center, I was again so impressed by the cheerful comraderie between the staff and the man I was visiting. This staff person is another CNA, with a foreign accent that I can't quite identify, who always brings the sunshine into the room as she enters. She has befriended the man I see there, and in fact, every time I visit this man, he invites her to receive Holy Communion with him, and she does. In these care center workers, who are not making a great wage, and who-let's be honest- are doing work that most of us wouldn't want to do, —in these workers, I see Jesus. I see His hands in their hands, and His smile in their smiles.

You see Jesus all around, too, I know. He's everywhere. If we have eyes to see Him, we do. We see him handing out food at the food shelf, or shoveling a neighbor's driveway, or picking up garbage along the roadway, or washing children's dirty feet. We *see* Jesus, if we look for Him with eyes of faith. It might be a very wise thing to spend time intentionally looking for Jesus throughout the rest of this Lenten season. During Lent the cross is front and center, and of course, there, also, we see Jesus. We see the depth of His love, God's willingness to sacrifice on our behalf, God's determination to bring healing to a poisoned world. Like those Greeks in our

lesson today, we wish to see Jesus. Within these walls. Outside these walls. We wish to see Jesus. And so as we sing our hymns, receive Communion, and enter into the world around us, let's carry with us the curiosity and sensitivity of those Greek seekers---we wish to see Jesus. And we do, and we will. Amen.