

Our Relationship With God
John 12: 20-33
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March 21, 2021

While working for the national church in 2005, I went to Gulf Port, Mississippi immediately following Hurricane Katrina –I will never forget the scope of devastation and the loss of life so many experienced; I will also never forget the outpouring of Christian love and service to help neighbors in need –there was such desperate need!

There are only a handful of Lutheran churches located throughout the entire state of Mississippi; nothing like other parts of the U.S. where you might find one on almost every street corner! One of these Lutheran churches is named Christus Victor, and is located in Gulf Port, MS. Christus Victor sustained only minimal damage from the hurricane, hence, it became the emergency shelter for the community.

Those many days spent along the Louisiana and Mississippi coast have blurred a bit in my mind, but one conversation I clearly remember – I remember it because I spent a lot of time thinking about it afterward!

A woman came to Christus Victor to receive help, and if my memory serves me correctly, I think she said her name is Justine – she came to access food, clothing, and medical attention –and she said to me, “What kind of church is this anyway?”

I told her it is a Lutheran Church, which, by the way, does not appear to help her any. “I have never heard of that before, are you part of an occult? I quickly assured her that no, Lutherans are not part of an occult –we are a Christian church, we are followers of Jesus.

“Hmmm, well, what do y’all believe?” she asks, and I start to tell her, but I remember she has specific things in mind. “Do you believe you have to be saved?” she asks me. While I am trying to decide whether to give her the long answer or the short one, I remember her getting right into my personal space,

and looking at me right in the eye and saying, “Let me put it this way: Do you believe Jesus Christ died for your sins?”

“Of course,” I respond, and while she still looks a little sorry for me, as if she knew I am saying something I don’t fully understand, she decides to let me pass. “Well, so do I,” she says, as she turns and heads towards the church doors with gifted bags of food and clothes in her hands.

That is the end of it for her, but not for me. By asking me about the connection between my life and Jesus’ death, she opens up all those old uncomfortable questions for me again. Yes, I believe Christ died for the sins of the whole world—only how does that work exactly?

The 12th chapter of John contains most of what Jesus has to say about his own death in that Gospel. According to John, he says it in Jerusalem during Passover, the last week of his life, when some Greeks who are in town for the festival ask to see Jesus.

Relationship is at the heart of our Gospel text from John on this last Sunday of Lent, not only for us, but also for Jesus. Ours with God. God's with Jesus. Jesus with us. Because this relationship is about to get a lot more complicated. Really complicated. And really, really, hard. And we are going to want to bail, big time. This chapter in John's gospel is one that could easily be passed over—it is between the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which is kind of a big deal, and the foot washing and farewell discourse by Jesus—however, this moment in the story asks us, do you want to see Jesus? Are you sure? Well, then, follow me. And we are going to want to look anywhere else but where Jesus will ask us to cast our gaze. There has to be a different way, a different answer, a different plan.

Because it is so not a good plan. Jesus knows perfectly well what the plan is. That's the problem with John's Jesus. Jesus is a big know-it-all. And we are not quite sure that Jesus knowing everything is the real Jesus, the human Jesus, the Jesus who suffers and dies. The problem with John's Jesus is that Jesus knows just too darn much. And if he knows that much, if he knows the plan, what is the point? Just going through the motions like we do with so many of our relationships? Why be arrested? Why go on trial? Why be executed? To put it simply, what's the point?

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” Jesus tells his disciples, and not only them, but the whole crowd standing around them. “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit,” Jesus says.

A grain of wheat cannot grow unless it dies. That is how Jesus puts it.

For the seed to do what it is meant to do, it has to be given up. It has to fall into the earth and be buried. It has to sit down there in the dark until its hour comes, when it will swell, crack, and hatch new life – a green shoot that will climb toward the sun until it breaks through, becoming a golden stalk of wheat that bends in the wind and bears much fruit. If you dig around in its roots looking for the seed, you won’t find it anymore. It is dead and gone. It gave up its life so there could be more wheat in the world.

And that's the whole point of Jesus' words here in John's Gospel.

The point of the cross. Interpreting his death for us. Telling us what it means before it happens.

Making sense of something that seems to make no sense at all. Because we will want to look the other way and then we will not see. It is not unlike the raising of Lazarus. Jesus knew that we would totally not get what it would mean to bring Lazarus back from the dead. So instead of bringing him back and then telling us what it means, he tells us beforehand. Martha thinks that Lazarus will be raised-- on the last day. Ah, no, Martha. That's not what I mean, Jesus says. What I am about to do is not just about your future. It is everything about your present. I am the resurrection AND the life.

You want to see me? You want to know what the cross will be about? Well, let me tell you. It's not about anything you want it to be or need it to be. It's about what God wants it to be and needs it to be.

We want simple reconciliation. We want this to be all part of the plan. We want it to be THE plan. We want this to make sense. But it doesn't. And as soon as we

explain it or rationalize it or justify it, well, we have made the cross something it is not.

And so, when the hour arrives, Jesus has no choice but to shift our gaze, to put things into focus, to get us to see differently.

Because if we want the cross to be about suffering and how good and necessary it is, we will need to think again. If we think it should be about sacrifice, we will need to think again. If we want to view it as some sort of divine initiation, we will need to think again.

You know, this is a very different understanding of Jesus' death than the one most of us are taught, which is that Jesus died to atone for our sins.

However, according to John's gospel, Jesus dies to fill the world with wheat, with so many siblings of God that no one will ever want for bread again! Only, in order to do that, the seed has to be planted. It has to die, or it will never grow.

Everything that is human, everything that becomes incarnated, must die. And this is what God knows in becoming us, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us in Jesus. This text does not allow us to explain away the suffering, to justify the pain, or to rationalize a sort of divine/human exchange. Because if we did, our suffering, our pain, our hopes would be for nothing.

But here on this last Sunday of Lent, let's not kid ourselves. We can make every attempt to understand or argue or apologize for Jesus' death on the cross; but if we take it for granted that it is about some sort of divine agreement, we are sorely mistaken.

Lest we think that the cross is some sort of ultimate moment of divine atonement, Jesus sets us straight. If in the two weeks ahead we think that there is some sort of miracle in Jesus being crucified, well, that's not what Jesus says here.

Jesus reminds us today, before Holy Week, before even his parting words to the disciples, that his death is not the end at all.

It is no accident that Jesus helps us make sense of the resurrection before he helps us make sense of the cross. The whole order of things is mixed up, turned

on its head. Life is death and death is life. The cross is not the answer. It is the question. It is not the moment, but a moment, of Jesus' journey—his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The cross is not the end. Not a very popular statement probably two weeks before Good Friday. We often are compelled to milk the suffering and death of Jesus for all it is worth, right? Because somehow that would justify our own suffering and pain. And maybe explain every relationship that we have had that has ended in despair and disappointment.

But Jesus will not let us go there. And this is no fast track to the resurrection either. The cross is not the end; it is the beginning. It is about recognizing, accepting, seeing, that God knows a relationship with God is complicated. And that Jesus is no easy answer. Because, it actually matters that God becomes human, not just that God dies. It matters that God wants to know what it means to live like us and not just die like us. Because a blip in the plan is the necessary complication to make life with God now and forever possible.

Because Jesus is willing to die, God can raise him from the dead. Because Jesus is willing to die, we can discover that death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Because Jesus is willing to die, a new community can form in his name, one that redefines its life on the basis of his death.

So here we are in a field of wheat, for some of us this field is right here in the Fox River Valley and for others, it is beyond our valley, who owe our lives to him. If Jesus had not died, we would not be here. Because Jesus did, we are. Jesus has spoken to us about the way of life and the way of death, letting us know that these are the only two choices and that none of us may abstain.

When the hour comes, each of us has a grain of wheat with which to cast our vote. It is the grain of our lives, and all of creation is holding its breath to see what we will do with it. Dear siblings in Christ, what will you do? What will you do?

Amen.