

Worship for March 21, 2021
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Pastor John

Greeting/Musical Welcome
“There is Mercy” (The Many)

Call to Worship (unison)

Turn from your desires in this world; Turn your hearts toward Jesus. Turn your thoughts away from envy; Turn your minds upon Jesus. Turn from any acts of self-preservation; Turn to living as Jesus did, becoming last of all and servant of all. Turn! Turn! Turn from the things that are short lived or fleeting. Turn our lives to the ways of Jesus. Amen!

Gathering Hymn - O God, How We Have Wandered
New Century Hymnal #202

O God, how we have wandered and hidden from your face;
In foolishness have squandered your legacy of grace.
But how, in exile dwelling, we turn with fear and shame,
As distant but compelling, you call us each by name.

And now at length discerning the evil that we do,
By faith we are returning with hope and trust in you.
In haste you come to meet us, and home rejoicing bring,
In gladness there to greet us with calf and robe and ring.

O God of all the living, both banished and restored,
Compassionate, forgiving, our peace and hope assured.
Grant now that our transgressing, our faithlessness may cease.
Stretch out your hand in blessing, in pardon, and in peace.

Opening Prayer (unison)

Genesis 18-21; 1 Samuel 1-2:21; Luke 1:5-57

Loving God, our faces are sometimes lined with worry, our days full of stress and struggle.

Yet we come today, grateful that in the midst of this crowded and troubled world, children are still born and bring hope to us.

Surprise us now with your presence; Renew our sense of wonder; Keep us open to the gift of your Spirit, with us in our singing, praying, speaking, and living. Amen.

Scripture - John 12:20-33 - Inclusive Language Lectionary

John speaks of the glorification of the Human One

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said, "Sir, we wish to meet Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Human One to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves their life loses it, and whoever hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Anyone who

serves me must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; anyone who serves me will be honored by God. "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'God, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. God, glorify your name.'" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Jesus said this to show by what death he was to die.

Jeremiah 31:33-34 - Common English Bible

God promises a new covenant with the houses of Israel and Judah.

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord: I will put my Instructions within them, and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the Lord!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

Sermon

The hour has come for the Human One to be glorified.”

References to the “hour” of Jesus in the first eleven chapters of John point forward to this. “My hour has not yet come,” Jesus announces to his mother in Chapter 2: Verse 4. Then when Jesus’ teaching astonishes Jerusalem, the leaders attempt to arrest him, but fail “because his hour had not yet come” (7:30). Again in 8:20 the narrator explains that Jesus could not be arrested because his hour “had not yet come.”

But then abruptly, in 12:23, the situation changes, and Jesus announces that the “hour” has now arrived.

An illustration of the fact that “the world” has now gone after Jesus is enacted in that sort of awkward scene in verses 20-22. First the narrator introduces the presence of certain Greeks, who are presumably Gentile converts in view of their having come to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. The Greeks present themselves to the Galilean Philip with the declaration, “Sir, we wish to meet Jesus.” Philip presents their request to Andrew, and the two of them in turn present the request to Jesus. Now, absent from this elaborate scene-setting is any clear indication that the Greeks in question actually do see Jesus or that they come to faith. But, the whole scenario highlights their quest. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “What makes them important emerges in Jesus’ comment in v. 23 that the “hour” has come; that is, the arrival of “the world” in the persons of these Greeks indicates that Jesus’ death is imminent. The popularity of Jesus in this passage quickly fades and turns into the hostility that confronts Pilate and demands Jesus’ crucifixion

(18:28-19:16). The world is a thoroughly unreliable place; neither its hostility nor its adoration can be trusted.”

Of course, Jesus’ “hour” does not belong to him alone. The attitude of Jesus toward his impending death becomes a model for all believers. Of course, how you interpret that and how it plays out in your particular life are all quite varied and distinctive. Amen for that!

I’ve been thinking about how the author of John chooses to identify the men who came to Philip. The writer takes the time to identify them as “other”. They did not say “some men came to see Jesus” but “some Greeks”. They were outsiders. But they had made that journey to the festival and were passionate enough to seek an audience with Jesus. Philip and Andrew heard their plea and went to Jesus on their behalf.

This season of Lent, reading those verses from John 12, our attention may be pulled back to the importance of drawing closer to God and to one another. Drawing closer to one another, at least physically, is a challenge during this pandemic!

Just imagine being invited into this story in the character of the two Greeks—the two gentiles, having arrived to seek an audience with Jesus. They’re in a place that is not their home, in the midst of folks that are now their own. They chose to leave the safety and comfort of their own homes to pursue something. No doubt that had some challenges and loss connected to it. But the risk is not the end of their story, it’s probably just the beginning.

In that quick reference they sought out Philip and Andrew. We don't know why, and can't presume to understand why they chose to trust these two men but something must have indicated to them that they could approach them. One short verse, with maybe so much for us all to learn—to ask ourselves whether or not we are approachable. Are we someone that the “other” can come to with their need? Are we drawing people closer to us or pushing them further to the margins?

We're given a chance to ask ourselves this yet again as Jesus enters the story.

“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. Even in the midst of suffering and death, Jesus is grounding his experience in his relationship to others. Perhaps Philip and Andrew remind us to think about how we are in relationship to others when we might well be the one with power and privilege in our lives.

Henry Nouwen says this: “Through compassion it is possible to recognize the the craving for love that people feel resides also in our own hearts, that the cruelty the world knows all too well is also rooted in our own impulses. Through compassion we also sense our hope for forgiveness in our friends' eyes and our hatred in their bitter mouths. When they kill, we know that we could have done it; when they give life, we know that we can do the

same. For a compassionate person nothing human is alien; no joy and no sorrow, no way of living and no way of dying.”

I conclude with words written by Joyce Hollyday in regard to a man named Clarence Jordan:

“Born in the deep South near the beginning of the 20th century, Clarence gained a reputation, first as a preacher. In 1942, he began an experiment in racial reconciliation on a farm near Americus, Georgia. Called Koinonia (Koy-Nohn-ee-ah). (Note: it still exists today, with a robust mail order business in biologically grown pecans, Fair Trade chocolate, coffee, tea, and cocoa).

Clarence’s words about justice were applauded by the local folks around him, until they discovered that he actually meant to live out what he preached. He learned that reconciliation at the lunch table, where black and white shared together, was as scandalous to his neighbors as reconciliation on a cross.

Clarence had given up his life to God, and thus lived with the knowledge that no one could take his life from him. He understood deeply the connection between life and death. And so he endured excommunication from his church and gunfire from neighbors, living as a man who knew that local hatred and the Ku Klux Klan had no more power over his life than Pilate did over Christ’s.

Clarence spent many hours in his writing shack, located roughly 300 yards from the main buildings and it was here that he died. Joyce details on a visit there, walking through the fields and past pecan groves to the shack. ‘It was a holy experience for me, this pilgrimage.’ The shack had been used little since his death.

Marked original manuscripts of speeches and Cotton Patch Parable writings were on the shelves. A copy of a 1959 Encyclopedia of Candy and Ice Cream Making sat next to Clarence's Greek New Testament.

A blade of wheat, dried with age, lay on his desk. I picked it up, wondering how it came to be there and how long it had lain in its place. It seemed appropriate to find it there. I can think of no better symbol for Clarence's life."

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Pastoral Prayer/Lord's Prayer

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

"With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord for it is good." (Psalm 54:6)

During this time of isolation and need, the work of the church is more important than ever. For those who attend in person, there is a freewill offering plate at the back of the sanctuary. Please honor physical distancing and turn taking as you approach. Both pledge payments and freewill offerings are also welcomed at:

St. Paul's UCC
Attn: Julie Mathes
115 S. Cedar St.
Madrid, IA 50156

***Offertory Response**

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!
Praise God, all creatures here below!
Praise God above ye heavenly host!
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost! Amen.

***Offertory Prayer**

Closing Hymn - Where Charity and Love Prevail
New Century Hymnal #396

Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found;
Brought here together by Christ's love, by love are we thus
bound.

With grateful joy and holy fear true charity we learn;
Let us with heart and mind and strength now love Christ in
return.

Forgive we now each other's faults as we our faults confess;
And let us love each other well in Christian holiness.

Let strife among us be unknown, let all contention cease;

Be Christ the glory that we seek, be ours Christ's holy peace.

Blessing/Benediction (unison)

God meets us in the hard places.

The territories of struggle.

The sites of desperation.

The places of deepest need.

In our fears and our pain, God comes beside us.

With a commitment to extending this care to one another and all
our neighbors,

So that none may be left alone,

The Spirit sends us with peace.

The Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

The peace of the earth be with you

The peace of the heavens too

The peace of the rivers be with you

The peace of the oceans too

Deep peace falling over you

God's peace growing in you

Closing Announcements

