

THE HOUR HAS NOW COME
 (or, “Do You Think That You
 Really Want to See Jesus?”)
 John 12:20-36 (NRSV)
 March 29, 2009 – 5th Sunday in Lent
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA – Rock Hill
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JOHN 12:20-36 (NRSV)

- 20 *Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.*
 21 *They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”*
 22 *Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.*
 23 *Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*
 24 *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.*
 25 *Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*
 26 *Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the father will honor.*
 27 *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.*
 28 *Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”*
 29 *The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Other said, “An angel has spoken to him.”*
 30 *Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.*
 31 *Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.*
 32 *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”*
 33 *He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.*
 34 *The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?”*
 35 *Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going.*
 36 *While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.”*

Some time I would like to have the opportunity to take you to visit Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. When I do, I want you to see the pulpit in the chapel.

I do not know how many thousands of preachers have preached from that pulpit. What I want you to see is the brass plate that is attached to the pulpit in the chapel. Many years ago someone attached that brass plate to the side of the pulpit which only the preacher can see. It was to be a reminder to all the young-tadpole-preachers that their sermons should be centered in Jesus. The plate says:

“SIR, WE WISH TO SEE JESUS.”

Today’s passage in the gospel of John tells us of some people who wished to see Jesus. *We need to understand that wishing to see Jesus may be a risky business, for it just may be that when we wish to see Jesus we may see Jesus in the person of someone who is less fortunate than we are!*

To whom do you and I think Jesus was speaking when he said:

“Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least
of these my brethren, you did it to me.”?

[Matthew 25:40; RSV]

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“SIR, WE WISH TO SEE JESUS.”

That was the request which is reported in today’s passage. It is important for us to note that the originators of this request were GREEK in national background. This tells us that early in the ministry of Jesus it was evident that Jesus was a man for all nations and not simply for the children of Israel, the Jews.

What do you think that this says about the way that Oakland Avenue Church ministers to international students here at Winthrop or at York Tech? Have you given that much thought?

There are three things that I want to call to your attention in today’s passage.

THE FIRST HAS TO DO WITH THE FUTURE.

The great 19th century Russian writer Leo Tolstoy tells the following tale:

A peasant once went to a vegetable garden to steal cucumbers.

“I’ll carry off this sack of cucumbers,” he thought, “and with the money I get for them, I’ll buy a hen. The hen will lay eggs, she will sit on them and hatch a brood of chicks, and I’ll feed the chicks till they grow, then I’ll sell them and buy a suckling pig. I’ll feed the suckling pig till it grows into a sow, I’ll breed her, she’ll have a litter of pigs, and I’ll sell them. With the

money I get for the pigs, I'll buy a mare. She will foal, I'll feed the foals till they grow, then I'll sell them. With the money I get for the foals I'll buy a house with a garden. I'll plant cucumbers in the garden, and I won't let anyone steal them---I'll keep guard over them. I'll hire a strong watchman, and from time to time I'll go out to the garden and shout: 'Hay, you! Take care!'

The peasant was so carried away by his thoughts that he completely forgot he was in someone else's garden, and he shouted at the top of his voice.

The watchman heard him and came running out. He caught the peasant and gave him a good beating. (First Reader, 1872) [Tolstoy, Leo, Fables and Fairy Tales, New York, New American Library, 1962, .19]

HOW MUCH LIKE THAT PEASANT ARE YOU AND I AS WE THINK OF OUR FUTURES! And how much unlike that peasant was Jesus in today's passage as Jesus understood the future!

Whereas you and I and the peasant center our thoughts in ourselves concerning the future, *Jesus* looked to the days that lay before him in fulfilling his role as a suffering servant messiah who would give his life for other people!

Judging from today's passage in John, do you think that it is fair for me as the expositor of scripture to make that comparison or contrast between Jesus and us?

As you and I approach Holy Week,
we need to be very careful in our thoughts
concerning our faith and the future!

**THE SECOND THING IN TODAY'S PASSAGE
HAS TO DO WITH FOLLOWING JESUS.**

Jesus said: "If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also."

Now, my Friends, if we take our commitment to Christ and the Church seriously, that is pretty heavy stuff! Dare we wrestle with what it means?

It means that in following Jesus, we may find ourselves in places where Jesus himself would be. And where might you think that would be?

.....sitting by a bedside in a nursing home or in a private home or in a hospital

-walking up to a house carrying a casserole or a “Meals on Wheels” delivery carton
-standing in a Board of Trustees meeting or a Session meeting about to make a motion about change
-sitting by an illiterate adult, teaching her how to read
-taking an international student to the supermarket to make some grocery purchases
-writing a letter to your congressman and your representative expressing Christian concern on behalf of the poor and those who cannot speak for themselves.

One of the women of the world about whom you already know is **Mother Teresa**, the Roman Catholic Nun who spent her life working among the poorest people in India. Writing about her in *The Presbyterian Survey*, Carolyn Purden writes:

“Mother Teresa’s philosophy is best summed up on the prayer which hangs on the wall of the mother house in Calcutta: *‘Let each sister see Jesus Christ in the person of the poor, the more repugnant the work on the person, the greater also must be her faith, love and cheerful devotion in ministering to our Lord in this distressing disguise.’* “

(*The Presbyterian Survey*, April, 1979, in an article on “Great Christian Women”)

Some of us who claim Christ do not understand these words of Mother Teresa, for our commitment to Christ and the Church has not caused us to follow Jesus into very difficult paths of service to others. However, if we have made the promise to follow Jesus, we should never be surprised where that promise will take us! My own personal “Mother Teresa Conscience Prodder” happens to be **Atlanta’s “Open Door” Ministry** to the down-and-out street people of Atlanta. One day five years ago I conducted the funeral of a life-long 61 year old friend of mine who had frozen to death on the streets of Atlanta, and I have wondered many times since that funeral if, over the years, this alcoholic friend of mine had ever passed through the doors of **“the Open Door.”**

- (1) TODAY’S PASSAGE HAS TO DO WITH THE FUTURE;
- (2) TODAY’S PASSAGE HAS TO DO WITH FOLLOWING JESUS; and
- (3) **THE THIRD THING IN TODAY’S PASSAGE HAS TO DO WITH THE MEANING OF FAITHFULNESS.**

In today’s passage, Jesus says: “Father, glorify Your name. (12:28)

A.M. Hunter translates this: “Father, complete the revelation of Your holy love even at the cost of my agony.”

My friends, that is FAITHFULNESS.

With fear and anxiety that would cause one to sweat profusely, as if great drops of blood, to be able to say: “**Nevertheless, not what I want, but what You want...**”

That is FAITHFULNESS.

And that is what God is like!

God comes to us in Jesus Christ, offering himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world! And that includes your sins and mine!

Do you believe that?

I want to share with you one of my very favorite symbols of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It is a scene out of the novel Cancer Ward by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. One of the characters in the novel and one of the patients on the cancer ward of a hospital is a man named **Oleg Kostoglotov**, a man who has been exiled “*in perpetuity*” because of political reasons to a remote region of the former Soviet Union. Near the end of the novel, Kostoglotov is released from the hospital and on his first day out, he visits the zoo.

Walking across to the beginning of another path, Oleg saw a lively crowd, children mostly, gathered round one of the cages. There was something charging frantically about inside, rushing around, but always on the same spot. It turned out to be a squirrel in a wheel—exactly like the one in the proverb. But the proverb was by now a bit stale—and one had never really been able to picture it. Why a squirrel? And why in a wheel? But here was the squirrel, acting it out. It had a tree trunk inside its cage, too, and dry branches spreading out at the top. But someone had perfidiously hung a wheel next to the tree, a drum with one side open to the viewer. Along the inside rim were fixed cross pieces so that the whole rim was in fact a continuous, endless staircase. And there, quite oblivious of its tree and the slender branches up above, stood the squirrel in its wheel---even though no one had forced it there or enticed it with food---attracted only by the illusion of sham activity and movement. It had probably begun by running lightly up the steps out of curiosity, not knowing then what a cruel, obsessional thing it was. (It hadn’t known the first time, but now at the thousandth time it knew well enough, yet it made no difference.)

The wheel was revolving at a furious pace. The squirrel’s russet, spindly body and smoky-red tail unfurled in an arc of mad galloping. The cross pieces of the wheeled staircase rippled until they melted together with speed. Every ounce of the animal’s strength was being used. Its heart was

nearly bursting, but still it couldn't raise its front paws higher than the first step.

The people who had been standing there before Oleg saw it running just as Oleg did during those few minutes. Nothing ever changed. There was no external force in the cage to stop the wheel or rescue the squirrel. There was neither power nor reason to make it understand. "Stop! It's all in vain!" There was clearly only one inevitable way out, the squirrel's death.

(Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, Cancer Ward, New York, The Noonday Press, 1991, p. 506)

My friends: as we gather here this day with the wish to see Jesus, let us not forget that God in Jesus Christ has reached down into our cage, God has stopped the spinning, whirling wheel, and God has set us free!

.....free from sin

.....free from the control of evil

.....free from the fear of death and the grave.

So, because you have been set free in Jesus Christ, look at your neighbor and see what you can do to love your neighbor!