

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

‘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. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. 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 the ruler of this world will be driven out. 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.

Seeing Jesus – March 18, 2018

The Rev. Chrissy Westbury

Do any of you remember the Magic Eye pictures that were the huge craze in the 90s? I do!

Originally a series of books, by the time I was in college, they were everywhere! We had this poster sale on campus where you could buy posters for \$7 to decorate the walls of your dorm room. The Magic Eye posters were EVERYWHERE! At first glance, these pictures appear to be simply colorful patterns with little meaning. By focusing in a particular way, the viewer can supposedly look beyond the 2D patterns to see a three-dimensional image within. Note that I said “supposedly.” I could never see the stupid things, and I know I was not alone. The biggest TV shows of the 90s had episodes that centered around the frustration of trying to focus just right on these posters to make the image appear. To paraphrase Ellen DeGeneres – “My name is Chrissy, and I can’t Magic Eye.”

Apparently, the Magic Eye corporation is still in business. I went to their website this week and tried, once more to see what they told me was there. I followed the instructions they gave. I

cheated and looked at the images that TOLD me what I ought to be seeing. And, still...nothing. My eyes would not allow me to see what I was plainly told was in the image.

So...I did some research. According to the highly scientific website “Mentalfloss.com,” to view 3D stereo images, your eyes have to work together as a coordinated team. If they're not pulling together, you're going to have some glitches in your binocular (two-eyed) vision or stereo vision (where the two slightly different views from your eyes are combined in the brain). A number of things can cause binocular and stereo vision impairment — most commonly, deviations or misalignments of one or both eyes, situations where one eye is dominant, astigmatism or cataracts.

OK. So I can blame my astigmatism. Cool.

But that got me thinking... In order to see these images clearly, your eyes have to work together as a coordinated team. Sounds super Presbyterian! Our tradition teaches us that we best see the working and direction of the Holy Spirit in community. We make decisions slowly (often annoyingly slowly!) because we take our time, making sure that we align ourselves together to look beyond the surface to the fuller, deeper picture. We recognize that we see more clearly when we look through the lens of the Holy Spirit working within the community of believers. One of the major recurrent themes of the Gospel of John is this question of vision versus blindness. The author of this gospel speaks of “signs” rather than “miracles” emphasizing the tangible nature of these events. For those who have spiritual sight, it is clear what these signs point to – Jesus, the Word made flesh, the incarnation of God with us. For those who are spiritually blind, these signs point to an overthrow of a system that works in their favor – leading to fear, hardening of the heart, and rejection of Jesus.

The passage I read this morning is the culmination of that narrative and the turning point in the Gospel of John. After this, attention turns to the events of the week leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. As Jesus and his disciples gather in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, the plot to kill him has already been hatched. Immediately before this scene with the Greeks asking to see Jesus, we have had the story of Lazarus' resurrection, Mary's anointing of Jesus for his death, and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. (Yes, I know, that's supposed to be next week. John puts things in a slightly different order...) In John, the Pharisees are plotting to kill not only Jesus, but Lazarus too. They want to undo what Jesus has done. Because of Lazarus, many people had come to believe in Jesus, and they were not keeping quiet about it. People saw Lazarus walk out of his tomb. They saw Jesus.

As Jesus and his disciples came into Jerusalem, the crowds shouted out, waved palm branches, and proclaimed and testified to this man who was sent by God. This crowd called him their king and effectively told those in power that the end of their reign was at hand. There was revolution in the air, and it scared some very powerful people. Right before this morning's reading begins, John tells us that the Pharisees have realized that there is nothing they can do to silence the crowd because "The world has gone after him!" (Jn 12:19) The Greek word used here is the same word used to describe the action of the disciples following after Jesus. This isn't a mere "they're traipsing after him." This indicates a following after akin to discipleship. And it's not just a few fishermen and a tax collector anymore – it's the whole world.

These words of the Pharisees, "The world has gone after him," is immediately followed by the news that some Greeks have come and want to see Jesus. Representatives of the world, foreigners, outsiders. And they are using the same phrase used in the first chapter of John to describe the calling of Jesus' followers. John saw Jesus and testified that he was the lamb of

God. Two of John's disciples began following after him, and Jesus' first words to them were, "What are you looking for? Come and see." Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of darkness and Jesus invited him to come into the light that he might see. The Samaritan woman sees Jesus for who he is and runs to tell the others in the village – "Come and see!"

We wish to see Jesus.

Such simple words. Greeks – foreigners, outsiders – approach Jesus' disciples and ask to see Jesus. Jesus' response to this request seems to be a non sequitur. We actually never find out if the Greeks got to see Jesus at all. Instead, Jesus goes into a long monologue about death and life, seeds and fruit, glorification and servitude.

We wish to see Jesus.

The expected answer would be for Jesus to welcome the Greeks, to teach and preach, possibly feed or heal. Instead, Jesus responds by encouraging his followers to see him, to *really* see him. Jesus claims his identity here as one who will fall in order that a greater harvest might be realized. As one who has become a servant in order that he might be glorified and God glorified through him. As one who will be lifted up on the cross, and lifted up in resurrection, in order that the systems of evil and oppression that rule this world might be defeated through love, mercy, and grace. Jesus' death, as he explains it here, is not about satisfying the wrath of an angry God. The power of Jesus' death is in the community that is gathered as a result of it. Through Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, God's relationship to the world is irrevocably changed. The world that lives in opposition to Jesus is judged by Jesus' death, and its power overcome. Jesus' death has this effect, not because it is a sacrifice that atones for human sin, but because it reveals

the power and promise of God and God's love to the world – the whole world. Like those Magic Eye posters, when we look through the cross, the true nature of God is revealed. And like those Magic Eye posters, the full picture is only revealed when we work together as a coordinated team. Individually, we cannot get the full picture.

During this Lenten season, we have spent time in study and worship with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who believed fervently that Christ exists most fully within community and Christ's followers see him most clearly through community. For Bonhoeffer, this community was not just fellow believers, but the whole world. The church is the ongoing incarnation of Christ in the world, and every person is a lens through which we can see Christ. Not only does mean that community is the path to understanding Christian faithfulness, it means that when I encounter another, I encounter Christ, and that places an ethical demand on me.

What does that ethical demand mean for individual Christians and for Christian communities? Bonhoeffer argued, "As much as the Christian would like to remain distant from political struggle, nonetheless, even here the commandment of love urges the Christian to stand up for his neighbor."

I recently read a piece in *Sojourners Magazine*¹ which posed the question – Are we living in a Bonhoeffer moment? According to the authors, "By Bonhoeffer's own account, he and his co-conspirators were living in a time and place in which 'the huge masquerade of evil has thrown all ethical concepts into confusion' and in which evil appears in the 'form of light, good deeds,

¹Lori Brandt Hale and Reggie Williams "Is This a Bonhoeffer Moment?" *Sojourners* – Feb 2018

historical necessity, [and] social justice.’ They were living in a time that required a radical form of ethical discernment, attuned to concrete reality, historical urgency, and the desperate cries of help from victims of the state.”

Bonhoeffer’s world sounds all too familiar. The world around us is in chaos. Crisis after scandal, confusion and deceit. Communities and demographic groups in this country are divided, both literally and ideologically, by competing truth claims that produce conflict and confusion. When “facts” are spun and fabricated, when internet bots tell us what we should believe, when social media becomes the means by which news is spread, we must constantly ask ourselves - What is real? What is “fake news?” And how – HOW – are we to know the difference?

Germany in the 1930s was faced with many of these same questions. Absent internet bots and social media, the Nazi propaganda machine was still an effective distributor of half-truths and blatant lies. Bonhoeffer was a member of the Confessing Church movement in Germany. He saw Nazi racism as a Christian problem and a defining moment for the church – not something that could be separated into the realm of the secular or political.

“In his 1933 essay, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” Bonhoeffer wrote that the church has the right and responsibility to ask whether the state is fulfilling its duty to preserve justice and order. He wrote that the church has the right and responsibility to aid victims of the state, even if they are not Christians. And, most famously, he wrote that the church has the right and responsibility to jam the spokes of the wheel of the state if it is creating too much or too little

law. Jamming the spokes, he wrote, “is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself.”²

This past week found people right here in our community jamming the spokes of the wheel. Children all over Kalamazoo participated in the nation-wide walkout to commemorate the deaths of so many of their peers due to gun violence. The local walkout began as an action of Kalamazoo Central High students who worked to get their teachers, administrators, the superintendent, and the school board to support them in a district-wide effort. Those kids have seen their elders’ inability or refusal to provide them with a safe place to learn, and they are ready to seize the wheel.

Our neighbors at First Congregational Church put a spoke in the wheel this week as well, as they offered sanctuary to a member of our community targeted by ICE for deportation. Not everyone in this church will agree with that action. Not everyone at First Congregational fully agreed with the action, but as a body, they decided that it was what Christ called them to do in this context, in this situation.

To some this will sound like political speech. I know that there are many people – likely some in this room today – who feel that we need to keep the civics lessons out of the church. And, to a point, I agree. I am never going to stand in this pulpit and tell you how to vote or who to support financially or how to feel about an issue. I firmly believe that Christians of good will can disagree on many issues. I will, however, say, as it is written in the Theological Declaration of Barman – one of the confessional documents of the Presbyterian church - that I reject the idea that there are areas of my life that do not belong to Jesus. I reject the idea that I can talk about the

² Hale and Williams

life and witness of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus without talking about how it is relevant in every aspect of my life today. And I will suggest that seeing Jesus as Jesus defines himself forces us to ask some difficult questions. We may not come to the same answers, but we must at least come to the table together to ask the questions.

If an outsider, a foreigner, a refugee, the poor came to our door, would they see Jesus? Would they know, without a doubt, that they could find him here? How are we called to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in our community today? Do we see Jesus in the other? Do we recognize Christ in people pushed to the margins and crushed by systems over which they have no control? Do we acknowledge that God is the creator of **all** who dwell on the Earth? Are we mostly concerned with meeting our weekly religious obligations, defined by our attendance in worship, or are we looking to see Jesus in encounters with real humans every day? Do we bandage the victims, but refuse to get involved in changing the systems that injure them?

We wish to see Jesus.

Jesus calls on his followers to see him, not through the eyes of the world, but through the refractive grace of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit's lens on the events to follow, we see only one more Jewish insurrectionist executed by the Romans. The cross was not special or unique. Jesus was not the only person crucified by the Roman government. He was not even the only one crucified that day. The truth of that moment that resonates through the generations is that, in that moment, when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, and in the days that follow, people saw the divine revealed through the humanity of Jesus. Through the lens of Jesus, we can look through the cross, and see God's love for the world revealed. This revelation of God's all-encompassing love brings the world around us into focus and makes clear what we are called to do.

The corrective lens of the life and death of Christ reveals to the Church who God is and who we should be in response. The point of faith in Jesus isn't about where we will go when we leave this life. We follow Christ so that we may be more deeply engaged in this life – ever drawing closer to the kingdom of God through our love for and service to those around us.

Jesus calls us to look past the cross to see the community he draws to himself, the fruit he bears.

And he calls us to do what is necessary that we might be fruitful. A single grain of wheat is nothing as long as it remains a single grain of wheat. You cannot make bread from a single grain. But when that grain falls, it becomes a seed, and contained in that seed is the promise of new and abundant life.

One of Julian of Norwich's most well-known visions is her vision of a little thing, like a hazelnut, lying in the palm of her hand. She writes, "I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God. In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it." That tiny hazelnut contained within it all that is made. All of creation – which God made, God loves, and God sustains. We must look beyond the seed, to see what God sees. We must look beyond the face of the stranger, to see Christ.

What is revealed to us in this season? What seeds must we plant, and what fruit is bursting to come forth with just a little cultivation?

We wish to see Jesus.

If we really wish to see Jesus in the world around us, we must recognize that *we* are the fruit of Christ. And *we* are the seeds he sows. We are called to continue the great work he began – to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19). The journey to the cross is not a glorification of death; it is an invitation into new life. Jesus invites us into a disruption of our tightly sealed, self-contained, seed-like identity into a God-given identity, blossoming and bearing fruit in communion with one another.

Amen.