

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

Mar 21, 2021

Pastor Kelsey

John 12:20-33

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. Others 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.

Prayer & Sermon

*Loving & Transforming God,
Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.*

Take a second and think about something that maintains the status quo. The status quo in our church, in the Christian world, in our Hopkins community, or our society as a whole. Something intentional or unintentional that keeps the status quo going the way it goes. This can be good, neutral or bad status quo.

A church example: the people with the most time to volunteer are those that are retired or stay at home parents. So those leading church ministries are most likely not going to be those the church's ministries to the vulnerable are targeting. Young people, young families, or the poor and marginalized.

A community example: Hopkins and the surrounding area are made up of a high majority white population. That makes it easy to maintain our church family as lacking the diversity of God's creation.

A world example: Due to oppressive systems and marginalization, and the ways that our society has to move up in the world, those in poverty have little access to the education and job experience that could give them the best chance at jobs that pay a wage above poverty.

Do you have something? Now take a second and think about the things that disrupt or dismantle the status quo.

Choosing love over hate. Choosing what is right for the whole community instead of just for ourselves. Programs and scholarships that help break the cycle of poverty. Things like our Food Pantry that gives food to any and all who come with need for food within our school district and in normal times gives clients the choice to pick what works for their family and trusts they know what is best for them. In our country this year we have seen PLENTY of disruption in the form of protests and boycotts calling for a change to the status quo. As we think of disruptions to the status quo, and when we see disruptions, we should be paying attention to it to watch for the Spirit at work amongst it. The Spirit is a bringer of transformation and change and so when change is afoot, the Spirit is likely to be around it.

Our Christian faith, the church universal, has changed plenty over the 2021 years since Jesus was on earth. Religion Professor Phyllis Tickle, has tracked major changes to the church through the years and asserts that about every 500 years, the Church goes through what she calls a "giant rummage sale," a time of rapid reformation in which many cultural and religious practices get reconsidered and tossed out. By her calculations, that puts us in the midst of the 500 year cycle. We are in an era or a generation of change and reformation that will likely be discussed in 500 years time like we talk about the Protestant Reformation. Though that makes it sounds like we will be legendary and it is an honor, that does not make this time of great change in the church any less hard when we are the ones living through it.

Change, the need for it, and where God--Father, Son and Spirit-- is in the midst of it is what this passage can speak to us in a year such as this. The year of 2020 will be remembered as one of pestilence, pressure, and protest. The pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalized peoples, and there were multiple black lives lost to violence and injustice that hit the news, there were police officers who were killed in the insurrection or died in the wake of it. The election brought the growing divisions to a head. In 2020, everything changed for everyone so drastically in our day-to-day lives, yet so much in our society and culture remained exactly the same as it was before or we have returned to the status quo. So unrest has been constant. Unrest in the upsetting of our daily lives, in the disrupting of the systems that allow for more lives to be ended unjustly, and in the revealing of the rifts that already existed.

Many would see this level of chaos and unrest as unprecedented and an indication of bigger things happening in the universe. But as Phyllis Tickle would remind us, big changes in the church and the world are not a new thing. Unrest, Changes, and Reformation is a tale as old as time. As such, the change and unrest we are experiencing in this current era in our lives, country, and world, can act as a glimpse into what the atmosphere in Jerusalem was like when Jesus had his last public speech in the passage we read today. Our passage from John 12 today is what comes right after the events that we now celebrate as Palm Sunday in the book of John. Jesus just made his bold parade into Jerusalem, turning heads and making waves with the who's who of Jerusalem. Let's take a second and put ourselves in the shoes of any of those people who are listening to Jesus in that moment. The atmosphere in Jerusalem was not all sunshine and rainbows, this was days before Jesus would be killed as a traitor. Even not factoring in Jesus's presence, the people that make up Jerusalem were mostly Jewish people. This means that the air was charged with the effects of a people group being occupied by an empire, in this case the Romans. That tension is amplified with this group as a core part of their history and faith traditions centers around their fond memories of how their ancestors were liberated God by from another dominating empire in Egypt and brought to a life in a land promising them freedom from that. Now you add on top of that the divisions within the community that were fracturing because of the Jesus guy who was strolling in on a Donkey claiming to be the Messiah. We know that there were the Jewish leaders and their followers who were in cahoots with the Roman Empire who had it out for Jesus and already decided to put him to death so they could keep their standing and power. We also know from the Palm Sunday story that there were plenty of people in Jerusalem who believed in Jesus and lined the streets shouting Hosanna just the day before. That event alone might as well have been an election distilling who was on which side. That is a lot of overlapping spiritual, political, and social tensions coming to a boiling point as Jesus brings the public his final words that point them toward accepting change. Change in the way they live, change in how they can find Jesus, change in the way they understand their faith tradition.

Let's walk through the story a bit. The crowd was all together as part of the Passover Festival in Jerusalem. Verse 20 specifies that there were some Greeks at the festival. It does not explicitly say it, but seeing as Greeks were unlikely to be Jewish and this is obviously before the time that Paul goes on his Greek tour, that these were people drawn to the festival in order to see what this Jesus guy is all about. The symbolic meaning of the Greeks being the ones specified is that in that time, people

come from as far as Greece implied a worldliness to this gathering. Perhaps this is connected to the later proclamation by Jesus in this passage: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." This identification of the Greeks could be a nod to how Jesus's proclamation was already coming true, it was indeed the hour for Jesus's ministry to come to an end and for him to be lifted from the earth.

These curious Greek people bustled their way through the crowd until they could find one of Jesus's people. They came across Disciple Philip and requested: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." This may feel like a part that is easy to pass by, but we should not brush by it. This is the request that acts as the prompt for what Jesus says. All of what Jesus says is a response to wishing to see Jesus. Verse 22 also feels like a narrative line that can be skimmed by, but I do want to pause on this little human moment for a second. Verse 22 says, "Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus." Some Greek people show up, want to meet Jesus, go to one of Jesus's "Council," the Disciple Philip, who goes to another council member and then they both go to Jesus. For all of us who have passed along a question or concern through the gossip line or to a council member so that it will get to the Pastor in the fun game of Church Family telephone, this is a good moment to remember that our roots run deep! Though it isn't the healthiest practice, we have all done it, and even Jesus had it happen to him. I guess if Jesus just accepts this as the way of the church, then all of us Pastors today can take it. Anyway, back to the story. Jesus now gives his answer to the Greek people wanting to see him, in his only becoming more cryptic Jesus way. Let us remember that we get to hear Jesus's speech with the benefit of hindsight. Those surrounding Jesus in Jerusalem may have heard Jesus say he is going to die at some point. But they don't know yet what that will look like, nor how Resurrection will come after. Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Okay Jesus, so you told us yesterday at Lazarus's place that you will be buried soon, but now you are saying that the moment of your glory is coming. A bit of whiplash Jesus. We can now understand that the crucifixion does lead to Jesus's glory as he resurrects three days later. Jesus continues, 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. It is easy with our hindsight and a quick read through to read this as Jesus speaking just about his own death and resurrection. Jesus as the grain of wheat that must die to bear more fruit. Jesus surely was talking about himself, but he could have also been talking about more than himself. This comes through as we consider this as part of the response to "We wish to see Jesus." He is making a point about how he is the grain of wheat that will fall and if everyone keeps looking for that same grain of wheat, they will not be looking in the right spot. Jesus is saying, "You want to see me? Well, I am going to die, so if you keep looking for that seed and thing that that single grain needs to be what comes back and remains in the world, then you will be missing out. After the end of the week happens, if you want to "see" me? Look to yourselves and the community for the fruit you bear as my followers and those carrying on my ministry. I, and the Spirit, will be part of the fruit that will come from the seed that was started with me and now the seeds that I planted in all of you. This is more than just a prophecy of Jesus's death and resurrection, this is a powerful (though a bit cryptic) message of hope of the transformative power of Jesus and the Holy that Jesus is instructing them to hold onto

and live into after he is gone. This message of hope for transformation of fruit from the death and changing of a single grain or seed is one that still speaks today as we find new fruit and life from the things that we have to leave behind for change.

It is that powerful message that carries us into verse 25 & 26, as Jesus continues his speech, “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.” In isolation this pair of verses could be a bit troubling. We must HATE our lives to follow Christ? I don’t hate my life and I don’t want to hate my whole life! That sounds like a depressing way to live. Taking this verse in context of the previous message for transformation and looking to the fruits to see Jesus at work in the world, these following verses are given a bit more direction. Jesus is not saying that we should all hate our whole lives, everything about it to be followers of him. Jesus is saying that we must let go of the life we want to build for ourselves without God’s help, the life we try to orchestrate ourselves. Our lives of striving to be great and powerful. Our lives gunning for status and standing. Our lives willing to push some down for the benefit of others. Our lives that ignore those hurting and suffering around us. Or even less dramatic, our lives lived without letting God in. Holding tight to that kind of life, will mean we will lose out on the abundant life we could have with God involved. Holding tight to our power and autonomy means losing the chance to be a part of the building of the Kingdom and getting to bear that fruit infused with Jesus. We must let go of our ideas of the good life to accept the invitation Jesus presents us for new and abundant life in the Kingdom.

This whole speech by Jesus is affirmed even more as Jesus says, “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.” Jesus is telling them that this change in how he is a part of the world, that he accepts his fate as the grain of wheat dying to make way for the fruit, will all glorify God. This doubly cemented for us now, but was particularly affirmed for the people, as “then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” God speaks down to the people this one time in the book of John. There is not a God speaking moment at Jesus’s baptism and there is no transfiguration story in the Book of John. This is the one sentence attributed to the mighty God the Father in this Gospel, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” It is in this moment, during the days leading up to when the chips would fall, when the moment of truth came to fruition, and a few more days away from the moment when the true nature of the Messiah would become clear. This is the moment that God breaks the silence and speaks from the heavens.

This moment was You see, at this point in the speech the people are troubled as their understanding of the Messiah told them that the true Messiah would live forever. So, Jesus dying is kinda a problem for him being the Messiah and we know now that Jesus will be defying the expectations of even those that followed him. And Jesus admits in verse 27 that he is troubled for the people as they don’t seem to be getting what their role in the world will be well enough by this point. // It is in the midst of this momentous week, in the week that required these core followers to hear the things that will help them understand what is to come that God speaks. To all these concerns, God

booms down from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." God confirms Jesus's identity by speaking in favor of him and calling him glorified, but also assures them that the upcoming death of Jesus will not invalidate his claim as Messiah, but instead will be a catalyst to glorifying Jesus more and proving his place as Messiah. God was basically saying, "Chill out. I have already glorified my Son's ministry on earth and I will continue to glorify him and his work with the people even if a bunch of humans try to conquer him by putting him on a cross in a few days." God's words also speak to us from the pages of the Gospel today. Accepting the need to change and transform for the sake of living life in the Kingdom is worth it. God glorifies every step of the way on our journey to becoming more like God wants us to be in the Kingdom.

Jesus's analogy of the grain of wheat is a perfect analogy for the change that we all experience in our lives all the time. Whether we want it or not, change will come. Even when it is change we instigate or welcome, change that we are happy to make, change brings death. Change always means some kind of death. Death to an old way, to who we used to be, to a habit or practice, to a way we see the world or ourselves or our neighbors, to the way we live our lives. Change always means leaving something behind. If we refuse or fight change, often enough change will still come for us and in those cases we are more likely to bring down the good with the bad. Jesus reminds us through his analogy of the wheat and fruit and his following advice, to lose our lives to become part of abundant life, that we can accept change and die to some things so we can bring new life to others, or we can hold onto the old, to the status quo, to the comfortable and die with it. Those are our options and there is only one faithful choice. Jesus is challenging us to pick the harder thing, the more uncomfortable thing. This must be a pretty important choice if this is Jesus's last piece of wisdom shared with the general public, the greater community of his followers.

The good news is that Jesus is not just giving us this big challenge and telling us to figure out what needs to change and how on our own with a sprinkle of good luck, you better get it right. Jesus reminds us that as he is lifted up from the earth, in all moments to come, in the crucifixion, in the resurrection, and in the ascension, that he will continue to draw all people to himself. Jesus is not leaving us to do this work alone. Jesus is walking right alongside all of us to help us figure out what seeds of grain need to fall to the earth and die and which fruit to nurture on the vine. And even greater, Jesus also welcomes the Holy Spirit into the world to dwell among and within us, being the force of transformation.

As we live our lives with Christ, accepting the Holy Spirit's nudging, again and again we are reformed. The process is uncomfortable, but if this past year was any indication, the status quo is most often not what should be maintained forever. Change can happen with us, in our lives, in our church, in our community, in our country, even the world, if only we are willing to let it take root and flourish.

Instead of a prayer right away, I invite you to spend a moment in reflection with me. Talking about change in the bold words of "Change, even when welcomed, means death." probably stirred you up a little bit in some way. I encourage you to take this

moment of reflection to think about how that idea makes you feel. Does it recall a memory or event in your life that brought change? Is there some place in your life or part of the communities you are part of that you feel the Holy Spirit is nudging you to let go, to let it die, so that fruit can sprout new?

Pray with me this affirmation of faith. I hope these affirmations help you to commit to being part of the next change to flower the fruit of Jesus's abundance.

*We believe that flowers need the rain.
We believe that humans need community
We believe that bodies need rest.
We believe that hearts need connection.
We believe that mornings need sunrise.
We believe that seasons need change.
We believe that grief needs space.
We believe that change needs time.
We believe that love needs security.
We believe that pain needs art.
We believe that joy needs company.
We believe that our spirits need God.
Again and again, our spirits need God.
Fortunately for us, we trust that
God is here.
God is at work in our lives.
God is a lighthouse keeper that never gives up.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.*