

Fifth Sunday In Lent

March 21, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: John 12:20-33

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever 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. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

SERMON

There were some Greeks who came to see Jesus. These particular Greeks had heard about the amazing things that Jesus was doing and was saying. Something like a fire stirred in their hearts when they heard about Jesus turning water into the best wine at a wedding in Cana, when the news of Jesus healing the paralytic man by the pool of Bethzatha, and healing the man born blind. But what really motivated them to come and see Jesus was when they caught wind of the story that Jesus had brought Lazarus back from the dead. Through all of these stories of the signs of grace upon grace from Jesus, a



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

seed was planted in them, in which the Spirit tended and made it blossom and grow. This seed that grew in them is what helped these Greeks come to the realization that being in communion with Jesus was something they wanted to experience. Therefore, they asked Phillip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

What was that moment in your life when you felt in your heart: "I want to see Jesus."? How did the Holy Spirit cause your seed to blossom and grow in that moment? Was it something you experienced in worship - the words to a hymn, a prayer that you heard, something the pastor said in their sermon, the real presence of Christ in the waters of baptism or the bread and wine of Holy Communion that ignited your heart? Perhaps it was an activity that you were doing in Sunday school or at Bible camp. Or, maybe it was something illuminating that you learned during a Bible study.

No matter what that moment was, it most likely happened because someone in your life was showing you or telling you about the grace upon grace that overflows from the love of Jesus. It is these formative moments in our lives that cause the seed of our faith to grow and blossom. These are the moments we remember when the powers of this world lord over us and create suffering in our lives.

The congregations of Salem Lutheran Church and Zion Lutheran Church, Pastor Diane, Dr. Satterlee and my seminary community at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and my parents are all some of the people in my life who shared with me the grace upon grace of Jesus that grew and blossomed my faith to the point where I felt in my heart God's call to become a pastor so that I too could share the grace upon grace of Jesus with others.

Without these people sharing with me that grace upon grace that is the love of Jesus, I most likely would be in a very dark place right now. My family and I, like all of us, have spent the last year living like prisoners in our own home due to the pandemic. What has made it worse is the fact that we haven't been able to see our families or solicit their help because of this pandemic. In July we had to make the painful decision to put our lovable cat, our furry companion of 12 years to sleep. Since the month of August 2020, I have been in and out of the hospital five times; I found out that my kidneys are so damaged due to 17 years of Diabetes that I will need to go on dialysis and be considered for a transplant within the next couple of years. In October 2020 it was discovered that the



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

chronic pain that plagued my body every day was because of a rare disease known as CIDP, which also was robbing me of my ability to use my legs. It has progressed to the point where I cannot stand nor walk at this time. The burden of the CIDP has also interfered with my ability to help my spouse with parenting and maintaining our household.

Yet, in spite of all that my family and I have gone through over the last year, the grace upon grace of Jesus has continued to wash over me and has kept me hopeful that my disease, my sufferings, my pain, will not be what defines me, but rather that I am a beloved child of God who is in full communion with Christ Jesus. If it wasn't for the support of this faith community of Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church, and the prayers and support from family and friends virtually reaching out to me and my family, my faith could very well be quite small right now.

It is my hope and my prayer that the same grace upon grace found in the love of Jesus has also kept all of you steady in your faith, especially during those times of great suffering and hardship. Of course, what is good news for us is that, even when we have those moments of doubt, those moments of darkness in our lives, those times when the powers of sin and death get the better of us, Jesus is still there ready to draw us back to him so that our loving relationship with him is restored.

The whole purpose of the season of Lent and Holy Week is to remember through our worship, our fasting, and our prayer disciplines that we have been claimed as beloved children of God through Jesus gathering the entire world to himself as he hangs upon the cross. It is at that ultimate moment of suffering and death that a ripple through all time turns the world upside down as the cross becomes our means of salvation instead of our demise. That is the power of the grace upon grace that overflows from the love of Jesus.

The truth is that Jesus first sees us. Jesus sees the ways we suffer at the powers of sin and death; Jesus sees the ways we become broken and blemished. Jesus sees the hurt when division is created among us; when certain groups of people are not welcomed into communion with Jesus and the church because they are seen as less than human. Jesus sees the ways violence and hatred leave deep wounds in our society. Jesus sees the way privilege and money are used to keep some in power and others neglected. Yes, Jesus



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

sees all of these things and still goes to face the cross so that a new life and a new way of living becomes our new reality.

This reality is the kingdom of God. It is a reality that is grounded in the love of Christ Jesus, so that it becomes a reality where sin and death have no more power over us. This new reality has freed us from the bonds of our brokenness so we no longer have to fear eternal punishment or death. This new kingdom of God had been our new reality here on earth since the day of Christ's resurrection. It is not a reality that awaits us only in heaven! This is the age of the resurrection, an age that is truly devoid of fear. Now that we no longer have to fear, since Christ through baptism has tied us into his death and resurrection, promising us that we too will be raised from the dead, we are free to live in the Kingdom of God seeing other people with the eyes of Jesus. The eyes that recognize the brokenness and the hurt in others, and invites them to come and see Jesus so that they may come to know the healing love of Jesus' grace upon grace.

Seeing others with the eyes of Jesus is seeing the sacredness and the humanness in neighbor, stranger, and enemy. It is to see them holy and beloved, knowing that they were created in the image of God. To see them is to do the work of ministry by inviting them to come and experience Jesus for themselves, so that their planted seed can be nourished by the Holy Spirit, causing it to sprout and grow. By doing this, we are taking part in the mission of God; the whole reason we are the church here and now in this community. Our mission, ordained by God, is to see people as sacred in spite of society's preconceived notions of worthiness, to invite them to come and see Jesus, and to help nourish their relationship with Jesus.

If we're not doing this, then we aren't really being the church for the sake of the world. Thanks be to God that the grace upon grace continues to draw us to Jesus, so that we continue to be freed and empowered to love Jesus, love the neighbor, love the stranger, and even love the enemy.

Amen.

