

Sunday March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Lent V

John 12:20-33

“What Are you Drawn to?”

I admit I don't really get it. I don't understand the expenditure of time, and resources to just catch a glimpse of a celebrity. Every year in Toronto they host TIFF (Toronto International Film Festival) and every year I shake my head. The news coverage is 90% weighted not to the coverage of the films, but rather to which celebrity happened to grace Toronto with their presence. Every year the same news story is filmed of ordinary folk, bragging about who they saw, photographed, or got an autograph from. I am sorry, I don't get it.

The first taste of this insanity I can vividly remember, was in the 1970s when the Queen and Prince Phillip were on a royal tour. My mother, (a real big fan of the royals by the way-She claims to have seen the queen in person three times) built up the excitement in our home of the queen's coming to Brantford. Brantford of all places. For days she ramped us up, explaining the rare opportunity it was to see her majesty in person.

I am not sure what I expected out of this royal appearance. I guessed she would give a speech. Maybe greet some dignitaries. I knew that the queen did a thing called a walk-about greeting people, and maybe that was what was planned. I remember thinking that this was great. It would put Brantford in the spotlight. Obviously, mom was onto something. The Brantford Expositor had even taken to prepping the city with a front-page announcement.

When the big day arrived, it was very warm and sunny, perfect conditions in my mind. Mom drove us down to the Brantford train station, where it became immediately clear that my mom was not the only one in Brantford excited about this royal visit. Before the allotted time of her majesty's arrival, the train platform was packed, with many people holding British flags and bouquets of flowers. The mayor was even there wearing his chains of office.

Some other people went all out, wearing fancy dresses and suits, which I thought was odd given the very warm temperatures. Soon, we could hear the royal train approaching, and the cheering began. That grand locomotive, with British flags fapping from the front rumbled in. The train slowed as it came into the station, and the frenzy of the crowd really took off. “There she is”, someone shouted. “Welcome your majesty”, another voice shouted.

A few people burst into a spontaneous rendition of “God save the Queen”, and I joined in because we had been taught to sing it in school, and it was the least I could do. It was then I noticed something odd. The train slowed, but it did not stop. Instead, it slowly crept through Brantford, with the Queen and Prince waving from the balcony of the rear car of the train. One crazed fan ran after the train, chucking a bouquet at the queen which she deftly caught.

In less than a minute or so, the queen, we had been all ramped up to see, was gone. I was very confused and admitted disappointed. I asked mom what was going on. Why didn't she stop? To which I was informed that was all she could do for us that day. For this we were all hyped up. Stood for what seemed like forever on a hot, crowded train platform, among crazed strangers, for a fleeting glimpse. I didn't get it. And you know what? I still don't get it.

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The celebration of celebrity is nothing I have ever understood. I don't understand why a ball player deserves 23 million dollars a year when he is only successful in hitting the ball less than 30% of the time. I don't understand why just because you made a popular movie, your opinion of politics or other matters carries more weight. I don't understand why the day after a celebrity wears a new dress its counter parts are sold out.

I remember a story about a man visiting a little European village. He was enjoying the beautiful sights and decided to stop for refreshments at the local café. He asked the waiter an interesting question. "Excuse me, I wonder if you could tell me if any famous people were born in this village?" The waiter without missing a beat replied, "No famous people were born here; only babies are born here".

So, why are some people famous, and others not? Why in the world are the Kardashians famous? But I bet I am not the only person who got very confused, when they finally met the celebrity, they were seeking; as our Gospel lesson today indicates.

I hope you can eventually appreciate how odd this passage is, in how Jesus responds to some new fans of his. We are told that some "Greeks" who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover, wanted to meet Jesus. Now we need to be very careful here, about who we think these Greeks are. Most people seem to think that they were Gentiles, but this is extremely unlikely. The word John uses for them is about their ethnicity, not the word commonly used for Gentile.

It would be very doubtful that Gentiles would travel to Jerusalem on the highest of holy days. They would not have received that warm a welcome. It is probably more likely that these "Greeks", were Jews who lived among the diaspora, or dispersion of Jewish people in Greek areas of the Roman empire. It is also very likely; they had never heard of Jesus until they arrived in Jerusalem and began to hear stories about him.

I mean, by this time, Jesus has done some amazing things; not the least of these being the raising of Lazarus. The city was buzzing with excitement about Jesus. The Greeks were likely curious, and thus their simple question to Philip. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." One thing I don't quite understand was that these Greeks were so hesitant in approaching Jesus. My best guess is that they hesitated because they were not sure how warm a welcome, they would receive.

There is some evidence that Jews of the diaspora or dispersion were often looked down upon by Jews living in the Holy Land. Many Israelites felt that the Jews of the diaspora had compromised their faith and cut corners on living out the law. Their accents, and inability perhaps to speak Aramaic, the tongue most likely used by Jesus, may have caused them pause, lest Jesus reject them for being outsiders.

So, they approached Philip, possibly, because he bore a Greek name, and may also have been conversant in Greek. Philip though wasn't sure of how to handle their request, as maybe he wasn't so sure Jesus was for anyone outside of Israel. So, he approaches Andrew, who was from his home town, and together they go to present the Greek's request to Jesus.

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In royal terms, these Greeks are seeking an audience. Most likely out of their own curiosity, but perhaps to see if there is any significance of this Jesus for the Jews living in the diaspora. Is this Jesus person just for Israel, or is his significance far more reaching? So, far, so good. It seems like a reasonable request, after all, and they followed protocol and lots of people wanted to see Jesus. So, why in the world does John include this passage?

Well, it's because the story takes an unusual turn. No one saw it coming; not even the disciples. Jesus doesn't tell the Greeks to come over, and meet him, nor does he speak about future expansion plans of his ministry to the diaspora. The Apostles will undertake that after his resurrection. What does he talk about? Death. Specifically, his own death. I am sure that like me, your parents or teachers stressed to you that there were certain topics one never brought up in mixed company. The big three are politics, religion, and sex.

We are told to avoid them, less we offend someone. But the one subject no one likes to talk about is death. I read somewhere that the two things' people fear most of all, is death and speaking in public. Therefore, if you want to terrify someone, ask them to give a eulogy at a funeral. We avoid talking about death. We ignore it, deny it, we use other words like "He passed on, or he graduated, or was called home etc." No one likes to say, "he or she died".

Talking about death is unsettling but talking openly about your own death is downright unnerving. Let me prove my point by asking this: how many of you have your funeral arrangements prepared. I mean, have you picked the music, the service details, the casket etc. And have you made these details available to your families. I bet if you try, they might reply that they don't want to talk about it. They don't want to think about you dying.

Our Chinese friends are so afraid of talking about death, they do not use the number 4 in their addresses because the Chinese symbol for the number four is very similar to the one for death. The same goes for a wedding dress in China. White is the colour of death, while red is the colour of good luck. Talking about death to many cultures is bad luck or bad karma.

These Greeks didn't want to talk about death either, certainly not about Jesus' death. How in the world is talking about your own death relevant to a request for an audience or in response to the miracles and teaching that Jesus is reported to have done? The Greeks wanted to see Jesus so they could perhaps believe all the hype about him. They had heard rumours about him possibly being the Messiah.

I think the Greeks in this story represent all of us. Because I think, even if we cannot express it well, we all want to see Jesus. Our reasons for wanting to see Jesus may be quite varied, but those reasons are clear in what we pray for, or about. Usually, we have a list; a prayer list. We pray to Jesus asking him to fix our problems. We all know those kinds of prayers; most likely you've said one today and we will do so after this sermon.

Unfortunately, our prayers kind of sound like we are just consumers of God's life and grace. Sometimes we want something from Jesus more than we want Jesus. We want to pick and choose what we like from Jesus and skip the rest.

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But faith in Christ is not a buffet where you choose what you want. Being an authentic believer in Christ, means participating in the: life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is what Jesus lays out before the Greeks. “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 be my servant be also.”

Jesus is being very blunt here. If we want to see Jesus, we must look into the face of death. When we refuse the reality of death, or to the degree we try to avoid death, we refuse to see Jesus. Looking at, acknowledging, and facing death is some of the most difficult work we ever do. It is troubling, shaking us to the core.

So, the temptation persists for many followers of Jesus, to skip over his death, and head straight to the resurrection. Now you know, why the lectionary lessons in Lent force us to confront death. Life, eternal life, cannot come without death. But it’s not just physical death. We die a thousand deaths every day. Death of relationships, death of dreams, career, health, or beliefs. Yet, Jesus’ point about the grain of wheat is that whatever death you are experiencing or facing, there is always resurrection hiding in it.

Every time we turn and avoid death, we are declaring by our actions, and our hearts, that we believe death is stronger than God. Every time death paralyzes us, we are denying that Jesus is “the Resurrection and the Life”. And one large clue that we are succumbing to this erroneous thinking, is we host in our minds the “what if” questions. “What if I fail, lose, fall? What if I get hurt? What if I don’t get what I want? What if he or she stops loving me?”

Every “what if” question, separates us and isolates us from abundant living, and ultimately from God. However, experience teaches us that it also separates us from each other, as we fear the death someone else is experiencing. This fear of any kind of death, keeps us from bearing fruit. You see, we are single grains of wheat, and we might survive, but we are not truly alive. Our death is inevitable as the following legend demonstrates.

The story goes that a merchant in Bagdad one day sent his servant to the market on an errand. Before very long the servant came back, white and trembling, and in great agitation said to his master, “Down in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd, and when I turned around I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture. Master, please lend me your horse, for I must hasten away to avoid her. I will ride to Samarra and there I will hide, and Death will not find me.”

The merchant lent him his horse and the servant galloped away in great haste. Later the merchant went down to the marketplace and saw Death standing in the crowd. He went over to her and asked, “Why did you frighten my servant this morning? Why did you make a threatening gesture?” “That was not a threatening gesture,” Death said. “It was only the start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.” (Peter Marshall, *Joe Doe, Disciple: Sermons for the Young in Spirit*) Just because you deny it doesn’t mean it isn’t going to happen.

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Jesus own life demonstrated this vital truth. Although in the garden, before his arrest, he prayed that he might be spared the cup, he also accepted the inevitability of the cross. Obedient to the Father, Jesus was not willing to settle for just surviving, but instead sought the fulness of life in God. The world is confounded by this truth. The truth Paul writes so eloquently about in 1st Corinthians.

Jesus and later Paul knew that God's strength is found in weakness, victory in what looks like defeat, and life arises from death. This is the truth that fortified him as he rode into Jerusalem to certain death. Being triumphant does not mean we get to have our own way or avoid death. Death is but a gateway. It is a beginning, not an end.

No matter what has already died in your life, God in Christ has already cleared the way forward. That path is the death of Jesus, but it has no value to us unless we submit to death, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Ultimately, when we accept death in whatever form it comes upon us, we are declaring that we entrust our deaths into the hands of God who can restore life and restore it in abundance.

By trusting God in all things, especially in death, we are lifted up, as the cross of Christ draws all of us to resurrection and hope.