John 12:20-33

20 Now 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.

Living Through Dying

As we approach Easter, it seems that the Gospel lessons become packed with as much material as is possible. Why is this? Perhaps it’s to give pastors choices when it comes to preaching – there are so many themes touched upon in the text – but I doubt it. I suspect rather that there is a sense of urgency, as Easter approaches, to give our congregations a very full picture of Jesus because the fuller the picture we paint of him, the more disciples we will make. The problem of course is that in twenty minutes there is only so much we can communicate about God’s incarnate Son. I will, however, clarify today’s text, point out the central themes, and offer you a picture of Jesus that will hopefully strengthen your resolve as disciples or inspire you to take steps toward becoming a disciple. Disciple-making is, after all, the primary function of the Church.

Jesus is in Jerusalem. It’s only three or four days until he will be arrested, tried and tortured, and finally executed. Just prior to today’s verses, Jesus has raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, and there’s a lot of hubbub. The Pharisees grumble as Jesus enters Jerusalem, “See? The whole world is going to him.” And then, as if on cue, these Greeks come up to Philip and ask to see Jesus – in Jesus’ place and time, “the whole world” meant Jews and Greeks, and plenty of Jews were flocking to Jesus. Today’s reading indicates that Greeks were beginning to come around as well.

Rather than receiving these Greeks, Jesus declares that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Up until this time, Jesus has been dodging bullets because his “hour” had not yet come. Now, as the world has assembled in Jerusalem, as both Jew and Greek have come to know of Jesus, his hour has indeed come. The show is getting ready to start. Jesus is preparing to be “glorified,” “exalted,” “praised and honored.” But how will this glorification come about? Simply through dying. But dying is not so easy. Jesus confesses that his heart is troubled. That’s quite human. I remember an old SNL skit where Steve Martin, sitting in a doctor’s office, is informed that he has a terminal illness. After struggling with the news, Martin asks, “How much time to I have, Doctor? A year? Six months?” The doctor replies, “Six minutes.” Martin launches into a lofty speech, declaring that he will make the time that he has left truly count. He will live life as never before, do things that he has always meant to do and make these last six minutes meaningful. He rushes out of the office and into an elevator. Dramatic music is playing as the elevator door closes, then soon opens again as someone else gets in, closes, then opens again to allow another passenger on, closes, opens to let someone off, closes, opens to let someone else out and three more people on…You get the idea. Live is something that we cherish so much. That’s the reason we get frustrated when we feel like we’re wasting time. So much of our economy and our national budget is built around life and the preservation of life. The word “death” is even used as a political football as one party accuses the other of planning “death panels” to “decide” if someone should be kept alive through medical procedures. It’s a very sensitive topic. Yet death cannot be eluded and so often comes before we are ready for it. Death is the reason many people start attending church as they come desiring to know Jesus who promises everlasting life. And Jesus offers some encouraging words regarding everlasting life; many have found hope in the words exchanged between Jesus and the criminal on the cross next to him. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” and Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.”

But you and I are not hanging on a cross at the moment. We can relate more to the people on the ground who are following him, and to us, Jesus’ words are more challenging than comforting: “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Jesus compares our life to a grain of wheat, saying that unless it falls to the earth and dies, it cannot bear fruit. A grain that does not fall to the earth and *die* remains alone. If you and I are the grains of wheat that Jesus is talking about, how are we to die?

It may be helpful first to illustrate how *not* to live. My favorite Christmas story is Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol,* and my favorite character is Ebenezer Scrooge. Here is a man who through his steady work has built up enough wealth to take care of his own needs, but his concern for himself has hardened his heart and isolated him. He has closed his heart to the needs of others. He is the grain that remains alone, with a hardened shell that never breaks open to either sprout or root. He has the resources to live, yet his clinging to life has led him to lose it, forsaking love for others, leading him to isolation and despair. It is only when he lets go of the money that he has been hording all his life, only when he spends it on others, when he gives freely and openly, when he loses what he has been trying to hold onto, that he indeed finds life.

Churches too can offer good examples of how *not* to live. They can become so self-serving, isolated, so blind and deaf to the needs of others that they do indeed lose their life. Their hearts turn inward and they get focused on majority rule, where everything is done just to please the core members, but few people are truly “welcomed” into the church. They love their own way of life so much that they fail to be of any consequence or concern to others, kind of like Scrooge on Christmas Eve.

But many people and churches *live* the way Jesus describes. We live by dying, dying to self-centeredness, and living for Christ and for others. We know that richness is not measured in money but in love that is freely given. And how do we give love? We give it through our time, our work, our money, precisely those things that others like the pre-Christmas Scrooge would cling to, believing that life depended upon them. A life that is spent on serving God and neighbor is a life of fullness. True, there will be suffering as there always is when we love someone. But it’s a life that bears much fruit and glorifies God.

I always pray that our worship services would glorify God first and foremost. When the Father speaks to Jesus in today’s passage, he says, “My name is glorified and it will be glorified.” The work that began with Jesus continues for us. Our lives, individually and collectively, should be lived for the glory of God. This means serving Jesus. Let us die to this world and be born anew in Christ.