

The 5th Sunday in Lent, 18 March 2018

John 12:20-33

St. Michael's, Norman

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During the time I lived in New Jersey, the diocese of Newark hosted a regional confirmation service at one of the area churches. I had several people to present for confirmation that year, and so we all were instructed to come to All Saints' Church on Saturday at a certain time for the rehearsal, and the service would follow shortly afterward.

That part of northern New Jersey is densely populated—one town merges into another without any obvious distinction between the two, unless you happen to know where the boundaries are. I went with a street address and a printed map (this was slightly before GPS were commonly available) and drove past houses and businesses and apartment buildings, passing by people out jogging, walking dogs, riding bicycles, circling back several times to the street number I had written down, each time thinking “This can't be right.”

The building located at the street address I had written down looked like an abandoned school or warehouse, at the back of a wide lawn choked with weeds and overgrown bushes, surrounded by a rusty chain link fence. I finally noticed a piece of faded poster board taped to the fence, with the words “Mass at 10 AM” written in magic marker. Rain and sun had caused the writing to run and fade, the ink dripping down the face of the cardboard.

I found an entrance into the parking area off the side street, and parked and made my way into the building. The interior of the church was gorgeous. Every window was filled with shimmering stained glass. Life-sized depictions of the Stations of the Cross, carved from black walnut, encircled the main part of the church. An enormous stone baptismal font occupied the back of the room, covered by a lid of heavy oak and brass filigree. Above the altar, a heavy beam spanned the chancel arch, with a huge crucifix in the center and the figures of Our Lady and John the Baptist flanking it on each side. And written on the beam below the cross, the words we've just heard in the Gospel: “When I am lifted up, I will draw all the world to myself.”

I was astonished at all this, and later after the service I found a parishioner of All Saints and asked about the things I had seen and noticed. I was told that the church was originally planned to be three times as large (hence the big front lawn), but the money ran out and they simply put a temporary front on the building and used the back door instead. “The neighborhood changed, you know,” my informant told me, “No one lives around here any more.” I then learned that the church was to be closed—that this regional confirmation service was a final celebration before the deconsecration and sale of the building, and the removal of all the beautiful artifacts.

I walked out into the afternoon sunlight, to see people on the sidewalk with their dogs, or out jogging. Kids riding bicycles along the main street, past the faded cardboard sign on the rusty chain link fence.

The neighborhood had changed, to be sure. None of the people out and about, enjoying the spring weather or going about their business that day, looked very much like the people inside the building. But to say “no one lives around here any more” was not true. There were plenty of people living and working and going about their daily lives, right there in that block and vicinity. Did they know, I wondered at the time, that such a place as All Saints’ Church even existed? Did the people of All Saints’ Church know that they were called to “lift up Jesus” out there among their neighbors on the sidewalks and in the streets, as well as in their beautiful hidden sanctuary, so that all the world might be drawn to him?

The gospel this morning is a little out of sequence with the liturgical calendar—we’re reading this passage on the last Sunday in Lent, before Palm Sunday next week. But in the story as John the Evangelist presents it, Palm Sunday has just taken place, with the crowds cheering and Jesus and his followers staging a parody of a Roman military parade—the “king” arrives, not on a white horse, but a donkey, in a none-too-subtle mocking of the Empire and imperial power and pomp.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” Jesus tells his followers, and some Greeks who have come to meet him. “Greek” can also be understood as “gentile” more generally—the city would have been filled with visitors, both Jewish by heritage and converts from other traditions, who would have come from all over the known world, to keep the Passover in the Holy City.

That’s “the festival” that is being celebrated—the commemoration of God’s deliverance of the people of Israel from the death of the firstborn in Egypt. The historic sign of that deliverance was the blood smeared on the doorposts of the house, a public and prominent marking of each household for protection during the days of the plagues in Egypt.

The writer of the Gospel of John is evoking this memory in describing the events of Holy Week. Jesus knows what’s going to happen, and goes to the Cross describing it as “glory”. Three times that word occurs in the passage before us, and once more just a few verses before this passage begins. The Glory of God revealed in Christ Jesus is most evident—says the writer of the gospel of John—in the event of the crucifixion.

This is not “glory” as we typically think of it. To quote one of my favorite movies, *The Princess Bride*: “I do not think that word means what you think it means.” Whether it’s the final bracket of March Madness or the Red River Mayhem in late autumn, or some other competition that seems at the time to put “me” or “us” (however defined) in the victor’s position, “glory” in common speech and imagery is about winning. To acquire glory in this usual, common-sense, right-handed way is about coming out on top, smelling like a rose, accompanied by trumpet blasts and cheering adoring admirers and an invitation to appear on television, singing the B.C. Clark jingle accompanied by the Oklahoma City Symphony Orchestra for next December’s advertising blitz.

Jesus has already thumbed his nose at that notion of glory just a few verses earlier in the text, in the so-called “Triumphal Entry” into the city and temple precincts. The problem is—as always—his followers haven’t quite gotten the message. They’re still expecting a Messiah who will sweep into

down, thrash their enemies, send the occupying armies running back to Rome, and establish Judea as a sovereign nation, just like it was back in the good old days. “Make Israel Great Again.”

Jesus isn't having any of it. Three times he mentions “glory”—but this glory is in the full and unlimited outpouring of his own life, offered for the sake of the world upon the cross. God's love and mercy, God's forgiveness and reconciliation, God's refusal to meet violence with violence, but instead simply “letting be” and embracing all of it, and all of us, and all that has ever been or ever shall be, into Godself, is the revealing of the glory.

“Unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it bears no fruit” he tells them.

“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Another translation: “Whoever loves himself is lost, but whoever hates himself in this world will be kept safe for eternal life.” Love & hate are not emotions or even strong feelings here, but a conscious choosing of following Jesus (even to the cross) above all other goods and desires, the stuff we imagine that will give us life.

“Whoever serves me must follow me; where I am, there will my servant be also.”

In this moment, as time is running out and he sees what is about to happen, Jesus tells his hearers (in first-century Palestine and twenty-first century Oklahoma) the mystery at the heart of all things, in a way that is easily understood, and yet still contradicts and confounds all the common-sense conventional stereotypes of what “glory” might mean.

The way to life—the true, abundant life Jesus points to and lives into and out of—is only and always through dying, letting go, letting-be. On the cross, Jesus pours himself out for us all, and invites us again and always to come and follow him in this, as we are able, when and where we are able. That following, that serving, may—and probably will—take us into places and situations where we might not go otherwise. It might mean discovering Jesus already present among us on a Sunday morning, disguised as a person I don't recognize, sitting in “my” pew. Maybe someone just outside those doors, walking along the sidewalk or biking around the neighborhood.

I wonder...where Jesus might draw you, and me, to Himself this week?

O Jesus I have promised to serve thee to the end;
Be thou forever near me, my Master and my Friend.
I shall not fear the battle if thou art by my side,
nor wander from the pathway, if thou wilt be my guide.

O Jesus, thou hast promised to all who follow thee
That where thou art in glory, there shall thy servant be.
And Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend.
(*Hymnal 1982*, #655)