

Sermon: Lent 5

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 18, 2018

Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 119:9-16

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

Jesus has already raised Lazarus from the dead... and the chief priests were making plans to put Lazarus back into the tomb... because it was on account of him that many were following Jesus... and even though Palm Sunday isn't until next Sunday... today's reading in John comes after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem... comes after the palm branches have been laid down... comes after the Hosannas have been shouted at Jesus... and by the way... in Hebrew... Hosanna means... *Save Us*... so in John 12:19... the verse just before today's Gospel... the Pharisees say... *Look... the world has gone after him...*

And in today's passage... some Greeks came to Philip... and said... *we wish to see Jesus*... they may be Gentiles... they may be Hellenistic Jews... just who these Greeks were... is unclear... many commentators believe it's because they represent all people... but Jesus is drawing all people to himself... even before the cross... and even before the resurrection and the ascension...

Benjamin J. Dueholm... Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church [in Wauconda, Illinois]... writes... the universalism of the words... "all people" has prompted some anxiety... perhaps this all-encompassing gesture refers to invitation only... rather than actual follow-through... but in one early manuscript... the Greek word is not even "people" but is "things"... which would mean more than mere invitation since things can't accept an invitation... so is Jesus saying... *"When I am lifted up... I will give all people the chance to come to me."*... or is the magnetism which Jesus exerts in this Gospel... not just

simple charisma or persuasion... but something which rearranges the world and draws all of creation... into a new and irresistible relationship...

It's very difficult... I think... to understand the crucifixion itself... alone and by itself... as a form of exaltation... we've been taught to think of it as an atonement for sin... that our collective sins are so unfathomable that God would take Jesus' death as payment for them... or we think of the crucifixion as something which was only made good by the events which followed... by the resurrection and ascension... but we have these words from Jesus... *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...*

So it got me thinking... does the dying grain know what it will become when it casts off that which limits it... does it know its potential... does it know how tall it will grow... how bushy it will be... does the dying grain know how thick its stalk will be... or how many leaves it will have... does it know just how to lean towards the sun... how to convert sunlight into food... does the dying seed know what fruit it will bear... and does it know that it can attain none of this glorification... unless its hull splits open and falls off... so it can die to what it was... so it can become unrestrained... so it can be free to be what it was created to be...

The seed may not be able to anticipate these things... it may not be able know... the way we know... but perhaps on some primal level... there is some awareness... perhaps it is willing somehow... given the right conditions... to be drawn to that which gives more life... perhaps it's willing to fulfill what God created it to be...

For the Gospel writer John... language about seeing... is language about perception... and so some Greeks at the festival... asked to see Jesus... they were drawn... maybe also without quite knowing why... to the Light which gives eternal life... they wanted to

perceive Jesus... to know him as fully as possible... in as seamless a way as possible... in a way that's similar to how the reborn seed knows the sun... Jesus perceived all of these recent events as mounting evidence that his hour had come... that he need must die... so he can rise... ascend... and send the Holy Spirit to be not only with the disciples... but with all people... and this is his last public discourse... before Maundy Thursday's foot washing... before his new maundy... that we love one another... his new commandment... that we love one another...

In v. 31... the ruler of this world... is identified in the footnotes of one of my study bibles... as the Devil... the *Diabolos*... the divider... but what if the ruler of this world... what if that which must also be driven out... is the mistaken notion that death has the final word... and aren't so many of our decisions made as though we believe that death does have the final word... aren't so many of our decisions based in our attempt to put death off... what if all of our decisions... were based on our trust in the eternal life we're promised... what if all our decisions... were based in God's abundance... and not our fear of scarcity... how do we think... things would look... then...

Jesus asks us to love one another as he loves us... but we don't... I don't mean being pleasant in the checkout line... I don't mean saying *please* and *thank you*... most of us do that... I mean that if we loved each other the way Jesus meant... we'd treat everyone the way we want to be treated... we'd give everyone the opportunity to take care of themselves... through affordable housing... and health care... and education... that we could do nothing other than pass laws that protect the least and the last and the lost... our actions would not be partisan... though they would certainly be political... the kind of love Jesus talked about would demand that everyone was taken care of... and those who think they deserve to be served... because they think they're better than the others who deserve less... they have inserted a *Diabolos*... a dividing line... between themselves and others...

In a recent video... Bp. Satterlee... the bishop of this synod... referred to the Prayer of the Day for funerals... *Holy God... give us faith to see in death... the gate to eternal life... that we may continue... in quiet confidence... our course on Earth...* and we see... he said... that Jesus is drawing all of us to himself through death... in the hope of the resurrection... and we are able... because of this promise... to let go of our loved ones... and even ourselves... *but boy... he said... we have a hard time doing that when it comes to the way we've always done things... or when it comes to how we do events... or run our congregations... or with the expressions of the church... or the way that we know God acts... or the way we know life should be...*

This Gospel... the Bp. said... invites us to let go of our assumptions of what these Holy Days will be about... to let go of our expectations of what this story means... and let Jesus draw us toward himself with a new experience and understanding... so we can let things die... and if we can do that this Holy Week... maybe we can do this in our own faith lives... and in our church life...

And our meeting after this morning's service... may ask us to be like the grain of wheat... which needs to die to some things... so we can be reborn into other things... so we can be freed from the notions which constrain us like a hull... which we need must let go of... so we can be freed to reach our full potential... we may not know exactly what that will look like... but we must be willing to die... before we can realize what God has created us to be... and bear the fruit we were created to bear... Holy God... make it so...

Mike+