

Sermon – 3/18/18
Travel Light –Trust God: “Seeing Jesus”
Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-33
5th Sunday of Lent

Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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Before Apple Music or Pandora or Spotify or whatever other music service you happen to listen too – there was Columbia House! (Remember Them?) I ordered hundreds (maybe Thousands) of Albums and CDs from Columbia House – many of which were purchased during a time of my life when I was into Christian Contemporary Music. One of the bands I enjoyed, both for their music and their lyric, was DC Talk. As I was preparing for today’s sermon I was reminded of a song from their album “Jesus Freak.” The song titled “What if I Stumble” begins with a quote from the late Brennan Manning which reads –
“The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today
Is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips
Then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle.
That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”ⁱ (Brennan Manning)

Now – I doubt that Manning had any hard statistical evidence for this statement and I suppose that it may not even be quite true – but I understand the point that he was trying to make. The world is longing for something to believe in that is TRUE and INSPIRING and that MAKES SENSE OF OUR LIVES AND THE WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE. Many in the world have been compelled by the life and message of Jesus but have been either hurt or disillusioned by Jesus’ followers – The Church – You and Me. They have seen the way that we fight and wage war in the name of God. They have seen the way that we say one thing and do another. They have seen the way that we worship God with our lips on Sunday morning and then spew insults and curses at one another on Monday. They have seen the way that we have misunderstood the call to love and forgive and walk alongside those in need. They have seen the way that we support either through action or inaction – policies and activities which are far from the teachings and life of Jesus.

I tend to agree with Blaise Pascal – the French mathematician who wrote about their being a “God-shaped vacuum” in each human heart that only God can fill.ⁱⁱ We try and try to fill it with all manner of things because of the ache that we feel in our hearts but in the end only God and God’s love can fill it. When the church makes it harder for people to experience God’s love we are not living up to our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. But when we are truly being the Body of Christ then perhaps we can help the world see Jesus and God’s Love just a little more clearly. Perhaps we can help ease the ache in the hearts and lives of others. And that is something worth working towards.

Our Gospel reading this morning speaks of some Greeks who were in Jerusalem for the Passover Festivities. They had heard about Jesus. They had heard of his teaching, of his healing, and of the crowds that had gone after him. They, as seekers, were also curious. Perhaps they wondered, is this the one who will make sense of life?

But as the story moves along we never hear if these people actually get to meet Jesus. Philip and Andrew take their request to him but rather than say, “Great! Bring them to me!” Jesus launched into another lesson – a teachable moment.

The gospel narrative throughout John has moved the reader along toward this moment through promise after promise that something big was on the horizon. But the timing was not quite right. “My time has not yet come” Jesus told his mother at the wedding in Cana in chapter 2. And the time was not right later in chapter 7 and again in chapter 8. His hour had not yet come. But here in Chapter 12 – Jesus says – “The hour has come.” And Jesus continued by teaching about his death and his being glorified. He taught about faithfulness in discipleship and service and about not being attached to the things of the world but rather obtaining life by letting go of life.

Jesus taught that he was about to complete his work – driving out the ruler of this world – and after being lifted up from the earth – drawing all people to himself.

With the world at Jesus' doorstep Jesus wanted them to know that his death was coming and life for all would come from that death. Just as a grain of wheat falls into the earth and then springs forth a harvest of fruit – so would Jesus death and resurrection fulfill God's promise of new life – “for God so loved the world.”

It is as if Jesus is telling us that in order to truly see him we must let go of our own lives, our own attachments, our own notions about who we want Jesus to be for us – and truly pay attention to the way that Jesus offered himself for the sake of others and the world. From the Incarnation – The Word becoming Flesh – to the Crucifixion and Exaltation – Jesus trajectory was one of generous and selfless love – offering himself for the sake of the whole creation – so that all might be redeemed and saved in him. If we see Jesus in this way – shouldn't our lives reflect a similar selfless trajectory?

Many of you know that a little over a week ago a group from Davidson returned from the San Diego/Tijuana Border. We went to participate in a Border Immersion Experience – to learn about life at the border – to speak with a great variety of individuals – from pastors to teachers to activists to social workers to border agents to those recently deported. The group that facilitated our trip – The Global Immersion Project - was focused on the activity of Peacemaking. How are we as God's people called and equipped to Wage Peace in the world? We were taught a four step process that effectively mirrors the activity of God in relation to humanity to reconcile us to God and to one another and to restore peace in all of our relationships.

The steps are **See – Immerse – Contend – and Restore**. The authors of this curriculum argue that these are the steps that God took to restore peace in and with the world. God – in love and grace - saw our brokenness and sin. God Immersed God's self into the created order through the incarnation. God contended for us in the life of Christ through teaching, healing, proclaiming and embodying the good news, giving himself for the sake of the world and securing victory over sin and death (and perhaps John would say – over the ruler of this world). And finally – God restores the creation through transformation, reconciliation, and renewed life.

During our trip we were encouraged to learn these steps so that we can practice them in our own lives. Seeing others with clear eyes, open hearts, and honest understanding – respecting each individual as one created in the image of God. Immersing ourselves into the experience of others in order to truly be present with them and to understand their life situation and their need. Contending on behalf of others through creative love to help bring about abundant life for them and with God's help restoring peace, healing, and wholeness in the world and in our relationships.

Because these practices are meant to be developed over time we were asked to pay special attention to the steps **See** and **Immerse** while at the Border. With this as our focus we were encouraged to see others as God sees them – as beloved creations of God - created in the image of God – as individuals worth listening to regardless of whether or not we agreed with them – as people with a story and a life that is gifted to them by God. When we positioned ourselves in this way we encountered others much differently than we might have. We also learned that when we further decide to immerse ourselves into the experience of others and try and walk alongside them through whatever struggle life may have brought their way – then we relate to them in a different sort of way. It challenges us to let go of our prejudices, our stories about people, our judgments about them...and invited us to journey with them anew with hearts of love and renewed compassion.

I won't share specific stories this morning about the people we met and how we were challenged but I hope you will join us later in April for our presentation. We will be publicizing the date soon so be on the lookout for that.

In reflecting on this border trip experience through the lenses of this text I became convinced that our ability to see Jesus clearly for who he is directly impacts our ability to be the followers that we are called to be and the church that we are called to be. If we see and immerse ourselves into the life and story of Jesus I am convinced that we will be drawn more deeply into his presence and our lives will better reflect his life. Holy Week provides an excellent opportunity to dive in and do just that. Next Sunday we begin Holy Week with Palm/Passion Sunday. On that Sunday we will hear the story of Jesus entry into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey to the waving of palm branches and the shouts of "Hosanna! Hosanna! Lord – save us!" We will follow Jesus life through the week with our Maundy Thursday celebration – shared with our brothers and sisters from Davidson Presbyterian Church. Here we are reminded of the commandment to love one another as we kneel to wash one another's feet and as we gather at the table of the Lord to celebrate communion in our Congregation House. On Good Friday we will gather in Lingle Chapel and remember the arrest, the trial, the suffering, and the crucifixion of Jesus. This short but powerful service invites us into the darkest and most difficult hours of Jesus' life. On Saturday evening we will worship in the Sanctuary through the Great Vigil of Easter as we hear again the Salvation Story of God from the beginning of creation through the giving of new life in the resurrection. This service ties it all together in a beautiful way that incorporates light, music, scripture, movement, and the celebration of both the sacraments of Baptism and Communion. Finally on Easter morning – we will join with all creation to bear witness to the resurrection and give thanks with triumphant shouts for Jesus victory over sin and death!

You would SEE Jesus much more clearly by participating in all of these services. I know it may seem like a lot to ask for you and your family to come to them all but I hope you will try and come to as many as possible. It is well worth it. In seeing Jesus more clearly and in SEEING how GOD is at work in the world to Love, Save, and Restore the whole of creation, we will be more able to Live as he lived and –As the Body of Christ – to be the visible demonstration of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

This is the vision that the Prophet Jeremiah put before the people of God. God is making a new covenant with us so that the ways of God will be emblazoned on our hearts and we will all know God. It will be natural for us to walk in the ways of Jesus and to live in gratitude and love. We will see clearly who God is and who we are as God's people. On that day, our words will match our actions. The love that we proclaim will be fully lived out in our lives. We will practice forgiveness and work for the reconciliation of the world. We will not be able to sit down and allow injustice. We will not keep silent while others are abused or marginalized. We will not tolerate dishonesty but will celebrate the truth. We will SEE Jesus clearly and we will walk faithfully in his way without a second thought.

Theologian Samuel K. Roberts writes that "Members of the body of Christ embody the grace filled living, suggestive of the same graciousness extended to humanity by God and embodied so dramatically in Jesus sacrificial living and dying. Finally, such living is done with no pretense to moral purity but rather in response to what God has done in setting forth the conditions for this new covenant. Ultimately, grace-filled living is pursued in gratitude to God."ⁱⁱⁱ (Samuel K. Roberts)

Friends, do we see Jesus clearly? Or do we hide our eyes for fear of what he would require of us? Do we choose to try and see some modified version of the Lord of all that suits us better and makes life a little easier on us? John invites us to see Jesus as Word of God Incarnate and as the Lamb of God who offers himself for the sake of the world. Jesus is the Shepherd who lays his life down for his sheep and the grain of wheat that dies in order to bear fruit. Jesus is the one who is lifted up in order that all might have life.

One writer states that "This deep into Lent, the shadow of the cross falls over everything – a reminder that, even for God's most faithful one, there is no path around the darkness...Yet there lingers also the hope, the already-and-not-yet promise that the days are surely coming when even the cross gives way to life."^{iv} (Richard Floyd)

May we find such hope for this life as we walk in the ways of Jesus who we have seen clearly and who we are seeking to follow more faithfully. May our lives reflect his life in the way that we see each other and in the way that we live as a community of faith.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Brannon Manning quoted in song (What If I Stumble? By DC Talk)

ⁱⁱ Blaise Pascal in Pensees (New York: Penguin Books, 1966) p. 75

ⁱⁱⁱ Samuel K. Roberts, Feasting on the Word: Year B (WJK. 2008) p. 126

^{iv} Richard Floyd, Feasting on the Word: Year B (WJK. 2008) p. 126