

The Path of Love

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Psalm 51:1-12, Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33

In the vivid style of John's gospel, we observe a dramatic event that commentators call "The End of Jesus Public Ministry." It is set after Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, after Mary has anointed Jesus' feet with costly ointment as if for a burial, and after his entrance into Jerusalem to the cries of Hosanna by a palm waving crowd.

To be sure, this seems a little out of sequence, because WE will celebrate the entry into Jerusalem next Sunday, Palm Sunday — and this passage from John will reappear in proper order on Tuesday of Holy Week.

But on this fifth Sunday in Lent, our readings were chosen to help us accompany Jesus as he journeys steadily toward Good Friday. He was coming closer to the cross, continuing his ministry without softening his rhetoric or changing his itinerary, despite pleas from those who knew him or pressure from the authorities of the day.

Indeed, this far into Lent, the cross looms before us — as it did before Jesus — inexorably fixed on the horizon of Holy Week.

In John's Gospel, as the palm waving entry into Jerusalem comes to its end, the Pharisees cry out, "Look, the world has gone after him!" And then we are introduced to the Greeks; the Greeks who have come to see Jesus.

They come to Philip — perhaps seeking him out because his name was Greek. But, first Philip must consult Andrew (his hometown friend and fellow disciple) and then they must go consult Jesus... Instead, of responding to the request, Jesus begins to speak to the disciples. It seems like the Greeks never did get their audience.

James Ernest notes, "as happens elsewhere in John... quotation merges into interpretation as Jesus looks beyond his audience within the text to address his readers directly."ⁱ So, this morning, we have a word from Jesus — a powerful soliloquy about the coming cross and what it means for us.

But how are we to hear, "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 my servant be also..."

In Thursday Voices, we opened by exploring the image of the seed that must die in order to bear fruit. The Rev. Larry Black had the quote of the day as he reminded us that this was no "vague, vegetable victory" or palatable transformational metaphor, but instead the stuff of life and death.

Jesus spoke his words to Philip and Andrew, and through John's gospel to a Christian community that was already subject to official persecution by Roman and Jewish authorities alike. This late First Century community would have known implicitly that following Jesus was a high risk activity; so, here is John's gospel, calling them to surrender themselves — not to the evil that might eventually carry them away, but to God,ⁱⁱ the God who loves the world enough to send the Son into it in order that the world might be saved (kept sound, rescued from destruction, made whole) through him.

In stark language, John's gospel challenged the disciples and challenges us to take part in Jesus' work of love. "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..."

Alyce McKenzie imagines the (by now forgotten) Greeks listening in to the conversation with Philip and Andrew; she imagines them hearing a lesson in discipleship. "If you want to follow Jesus, understand that you must be, like him, a grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies in order to bear much fruit. You cannot hoard your life (*psyche* in Greek, *nephesh* in Hebrew), making your survival your goal. You must have a higher allegiance, one born out of belief in and following the Son of Man who is glorified and who glorifies God in his crucifixion and resurrection."ⁱⁱⁱ

Writing for a persecuted church, John's gospel presents itself in stark language because human "instincts toward self-preservation are so high, at times, that we have a hard time taking seriously the idea that we might be called to do anything else."^{iv} ...to do anything other than survive.

These words of Jesus challenge our natural inclination to make self-preservation our highest goal. Jesus calls us to die to self so that we might rise to that eternal quality of life, which seeks — with Jesus — the soundness and health and wholeness of the world. Jesus shares that even he is troubled in his soul (another translation for the Greek *psyche*). But he will not ask God to preserve his life as if that were the highest good. Instead he seeks to continue his ministry that will lead inevitably to the cross, to a place of suffering and a place of death — and through it to resurrection and a place of hope.

One commentator writes, Jesus "gives us a window through which to view and interpret suffering and death. Not the suffering brought on by things like cancer or earthquakes, but the suffering we choose to endure. Suffering that comes when we choose against self-preservation. And not the death that comes tragically and unexpectedly, but the death to self, death to ambition that is chosen in order that someone else might have a more abundant life."^v

With steadfast love and faithfulness, Jesus is willing to give his very life so that we might hear this invitation into a different way of being — a way of being with and for others, with and for creation, with and for God.

In this season of Lent, I have taken up the spiritual practice of reading the Psalms in a pattern first set by Thomas Cranmer. It takes the reader through all 150 Psalms each month. I can tell you that new things rise out of these ancient hymns with each reading. This month, I was struck by these words from the 25th Psalm:

"All the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness..."

“All the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness.” As Jesus faces the last steps on his journey, he urges his disciples — urges us — onto the paths of God and into a way of being that is marked by love.

I ran across a great cartoon this week. Two hip pastors, sporting soul patch and Adidas, are talking together. One responding to the other, “Of course I love people, at least in a theological sense.”



“Of course I love people, at least in a theological sense.”

Jesus is not calling us to love “in a theological sense.” The Jesus of John’s Gospel is the same Jesus who instructs us to love God, to love our neighbors, and to love our enemies. This Jesus calls us to the sacrificial and messy and heartbreaking work of love for the sake of the world.

You and I, we know that opening our hearts and our lives to self-giving love may be fraught with suffering.

We only need look around us to those in our midst who grieve the death of a loved one to know the risk of opening one’s heart to another. But without such love, where will we find joy?

Love is a risk. As we open our hearts to our neighbors in Rochester, we might be called to respond to their need and in the 5th poorest city of its size in the nation that need is deep enough to sweep us away in a tide of poverty and violence and hopelessness.

Love is a risk. Finding our calling to be peacemakers, love might draw us to Columbia, to serve as an accompanier and witness amid the violence and conflict over the nation’s oil and drug supplies that flow to markets in our country.

Love is a risk. Our love for others and for the world in which we live might call us to question unjust, unsafe, or oppressive business practices in our own industry or place of employment. Think about trying that in your workplace.

Love is a risk. It might call us to speak truth to power, seek the reformation and transformation of oppressive institutions helping them reclaim forgotten vocations to serve the common good.

Love is a risk. For through it, we might be called to lay down whatever privilege we carry, so that we might come to know the equity and justice that God intends for all people.

Love is a risk. For God knows where love is calling you.

Indeed, love for others makes us vulnerable. But it places us squarely on the path that Jesus — light of the world —illuminates for us: the path of steadfast love and faithfulness that led him to the cross.

In John’s Gospel, the cross is a place of *krisis* (the Greek word we hear translated as judgement). The *krisis* point is a point of choosing.

We are not likely to be martyred for our faith, but we are called to give our lives away. And we are perfectly equipped to deceive ourselves and “say we’re willing... without ever really doing so.”^{vi} It is our daily choice — to be connected with each other, to be connected with those whom we would serve, to be connected with the created order, and through these connections to affirm our connection to God.

These choices mark our journey toward the cross and beyond it into new life.

Friends, we can love our lives and lose them, or have greater love what is outside of ourselves and find our lives and our purpose in following Jesus Christ even as we work together for the wholeness and healing of the world.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Ernest, James D. "Exegetical Perspective on John 12:20-33." *Feasting on the Word*. Eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Year B, Vol. 2. Louisville: WJK, 2008. 140-45.

ⁱⁱ Farley, Margaret. "Theological Perspective on John 12:20-33." *Feasting on the Word*. Eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Year B, Vol. 2. Louisville: WJK, 2008. 140-45.

ⁱⁱⁱ McKinzie, Alyce. "Eavesdropping Discipleship." *Patheos Preachers*. Patheos Press, 2012.

www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Eavesdropping-Discipleship-Alyce-McKenzie-03-20-2012.html

^{iv} *Preacher's Magazine*. Nazareen Publishing House, 2006.

www.nph.com/nphweb/html/pmol/pastissues/Lent%202006/magapr2.htm

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.