

Sunday Sermon
March 18, 2018
John 12:20-28
I Corinthians 1:18-25
“Glory Redefined”

Introduction

If Jesus was God, why did he have to die? That was the topic for last Sunday’s Confirmation Class. And why on a cross, a humiliating, agonizing way to die? These students do not have easy questions in their class.

Ed Beck, Methodist minister, tells the story of how years ago he was in Daytona, Florida, for the annual pilgrimage of college students to the beach for Easter break. He was there with a group in outreach and ministry with the Methodist Board of Evangelism. That particular year, Ed said, was one of the wildest on record with drunkenness, reckless acts, and indecent exposure.

He said that on Good Friday about mid-day, as he was watching the partying, he saw a drunken college boy, surrounded by a group of drinking co-eds, climb on top of a car. For the benefit of Ed and the students with him, the young man decided to act out the crucifixion. He stretched out his hands and crossed his feet on the top of the car as though nails were driven through them and writhing in mock agony, he cried, “I am Jesus Christ, I am Jesus Christ.” The crowd of drunken young people around him took up the game, shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Ed said that he happened to look at his watch and realized that this was happening about the same hour that Jesus had said on the cross, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.”

I

Our gospel lesson today shows us Jerusalem, crowded with Jews who had made the annual pilgrimage for the festival of the Passover. Among the crowd there for the holiday were Jesus, his disciples and some Pharisees, religious leaders of the day. Also there, John says, were some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast.

It is important to John to record this incident to show that not just those of Israel but the whole world was there looking for Jesus. And to reflect the contrast between the Greeks who went to the disciples saying, “We want to see Jesus” and the religious leaders of the day who said to each other, “We want to stop this Jesus.”

In the midst of these contrasting interests, Jesus announces, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Glorified? What does he mean by that?

Will Willimon says that if you want to know, really know, about people, what we live for, and what we die for, then watch and see what we say brings glory. What do we cheer for? What do we spend our money for? What makes our heroes?

Winning, Willimon says. We believe winning brings glory. By tonight we will have the Sweet 16, the last 16 teams for the men's Division 1 NCAA basketball championship. By tomorrow night we will have the women's Sweet 16. By two weeks from tomorrow night the champions of both tournaments will have been determined.

The most valuable players will have been named, along with coaches of the year. Some coaches will have been fired. Others will have been hired at extraordinary salaries. The faces of the winners will be in the media. There will be celebration rallies. They will have glory, at least for one shining moment.

In Hebrew, the word for "glory" is *kabat*. In the New Testament, the Greek is *doxa*. Search these words in a Bible dictionary, and you see they mean "weightiness" and "splendor." Glory is that which gives you weight or substance and that which makes you shine.

II

"The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified," Jesus says. And we think Jesus will throw off the cloak of his humanity, and his glory will shine for all to see.

- But we are thinking what brings us glory.
Jesus is showing us what brings God glory.
- We see glory as high and lifted up.
Jesus shows glory is like a seed falling to earth, dying.
- We see glory in exaltation.
Jesus shows glory in humiliation.
- We see glory in victory.
Jesus shows glory in defeat.

So when we come like the Greeks looking for Jesus, or the Pharisees critiquing Jesus, what we find surprises us.

- We wear our crosses on shiny chains of gold or silver.
Jesus wears his cross on a bloodied back, bent in pain.
- We put elaborate gold crowns on the heads of those we exalt.
Jesus wears a crown of thorns.
- We work so that we will never have to stoop to anyone.
Jesus comes and stoops down and washes our feet.

"Father, forgive us when we do not know what we are doing."

III

It was the apostle Paul who wrote, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God."

Those college students were not the only ones guilty of treating the cross lightly, foolishly. We display the cross; we wear it. But we do not grasp fully what it represents. Maybe we do not want to. After all, why would we want an instrument of humiliation and torture as the symbol of our faith?

Phillip Rieff, professor of sociology, once said, “Any church or any preacher who keeps preaching on the cross is not going to grow. The preacher will not be a success and the church will not grow, because in our culture what we are interested in is success, not sacrifice.”

“Father, forgive us when we do not know what we do.”

Conclusion

Yesterday my husband and I took our grandson to the Charlotte airport to return home from his spring break. One of the gates near his was full of travelers returning to Charlottesville, VA. Those travelers were not weighted and shining with glory. Their team had finished a record 30-3 season, yet now carried the distinction of being the first #1 seed in NCAA tournament history to be defeated in first round by a #16 seed. Willimon was right, our vision of glory is winning, not defeat, suffering, humiliation.

16 men’s and 16 women’s NCAA basketball teams will continue the journey to the championship. All but two will experience defeat and elimination. Those two will achieve victory and championship. As they travel the road to titles and glory, we travel the road to the cross. Sin and grace mixed with fouls and free throws. The assurance of God’s pardon and forgiveness mixed with single elimination. It is easy to get what is important confused and where the glory is.

Those weighted with this world’s glory will cut down the nets. They will be photographed holding a trophy and signaling, “We are number one.” Meanwhile Jesus comes and redefines glory. His glory came when he was “high and lifted up.” Only the time when he was high enough to look down upon us from the heights of glory was when he looked at us from the cross.

Jesus rearranges, turns upside down the world’s definition of glory. We get it wrong; Jesus gets it right. “If Jesus was God, why did he have to die?” “He became human like us and suffered like us,” the confirmands said, “in order to save us from our sin and give us life beyond death.” They got it. May God help us to get the glory of the cross. Amen.