

Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33

During this Lenten Season, we have been exploring the theme “Depths of Love.” If you have noticed the call to worship each week, you may have wondered why each week it starts with “Lenten Travelers...” While Lent is traditionally viewed as a time of self-reflection and examination, this theme has invited us to lay our lives alongside others also on the Lenten journey and the life of Jesus. It is a sobering exercise to say the least.

As our lesson last week reminded us in John 3:16-17, God sent his only Son out of love, not condemnation. The farther we go on this journey with him, we are overwhelmed by the depths of love he has for all of us. What our lessons today will teach us is that above all, the Lenten journey is an invitation to once again commit to love like Christ loves. This morning's Gospel lesson is from John 12:20-33. Before we read it, just a little background. Technically, this is not in the right chronological order. Today's reading is taking place right after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which is actually next Sunday. Prior to the palm procession, Jesus has come from Bethany after raising Lazarus from the dead and the word is spreading pretty quickly through the crowds coming to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. And the Pharisees are getting fearful. Part of their role in the Roman political hierarchy was keeping the people in line to keep the peace. Their main concern was not the people, but maintaining their power in the temple. They were getting fearful that their failed efforts to downplay the events in Bethany and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem would result in Romans swooping in and putting an end to their life as they knew it – in verse 19, they comment “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!” **Let's read John 12:20-23.**

This passage contains one of the more unusual and unfinished stories in scripture. Did you notice the narrative in verse 20 that seems a little odd? “Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Phillip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.” (v. 20-22). Sounds like a little bit of first century social networking. What comes next? We really don't know; they just disappear from the story. So many unanswered questions. Why did they want to see Jesus? Was it to see somebody famous and they thought by talking to the disciple with the Greek name they would get the equivalent of a backstage pass? Or were they so anxious to believe in Jesus that they had to see him to believe? Did Phillip and Andrew discuss first if it was o.k for the out-of-towner Greek Jews to get priority access to Jesus? The two disciples told Jesus the Greeks wanted to see him. Did they see Jesus? We don't know. We don't even know if Jesus gave the response we hear so many times in scripture, “Come follow me.”

The next verse starts totally redirects the story. But maybe this verse is not so out-of-place as it seems. Remember what the Pharisees said in verse 19: “Look how the whole world has gone after him!” For a group that was supposed to be well-versed in Scripture, they must have forgotten the words of the prophet Jeremiah from our first lesson this morning, because in verse 34 the Lord declares that the law will be in their hearts and ALL will know the Lord, not just Jews, but all who have the Lord in their heart. The Greeks represent the world beyond dusty little Israel; as Rob pointed out last week, God sent his only Son for the whole world, all creation, not just a little piece of it.

And that is the point that Jesus makes by redirecting the conversation in response to the request from the Greeks. The remainder of this chapter is the last public teaching that Jesus did. After this passage, the rest of Jesus' teachings are only to his inner circle of disciples. He wanted to make it clear how Jeremiah's prophecy would be fulfilled – that ALL will know the Lord. But how do you reach an entire world? Jesus gets to the point with simple fact that everyone would be familiar with – a kernal of wheat.

As we discussed with the kids, if a seed is kept in the package, it remains a seed and if not planted or stored properly, it dies and doesn't fulfil it's purpose. It has to be planted and quit being a seed to grow into a plant. That is what Jesus is trying to get through to the crowd. Each person is a seed; If a person is satisfied with their life as it is and does nothing to further the kingdom, they haven't fulfilled the purpose God created them for. When Jesus says “anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life (v. 25), he does not mean that we should hate living; rather we should value the life and potential that God has given us to use it for others rather than being self-centered and only benefitting ourselves. As John Peterson states these verses in “The Message” – “Anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, be reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.” While it is our life, in spite of what advertisers would have us believe, life is not meant to be all about me. To follow Jesus, means being changed from “all about me” to “all about others.

Up to this point, in scriptures we have heard Jesus proclaim multiple times “follow me” and many, including twelve disciples, did. In verse 26, the focus shifts. The key phrase is “whoever serves.” It is not enough to be a follower; if one is a true follower, they are also serving and serving will be honored. But as the next few verses indicate, serving is not necessarily going to be easy. In the book of Isaiah, it is actually the prophecy of “the suffering servant” and that verse is on the banners on the wall behind me. In Verses 27-33, Jesus is revealing his true purpose that goes beyond time, place, and space – the ultimate act of service redeems those who follow and serve him. His purpose was fulfilled.

Some time ago we used the book by Pastor Rick Warren, “The Purpose Driven Life,” as a small group study. Maybe it's time to do this study again? As he puts it, “I want to

follow God's purpose, not my purpose. I'm going to do what I was wired and made to do." When a person takes that step, Warren says God also gives you four major gifts: Forgiveness, Eternal Life, The Holy Spirit, and Special Abilities, also known as Spiritual Gifts. Your gifts allow you to help other people in the life journey and other people can use their gifts to help you. Look at the Call to Worship again and let's reread part of it together:

Leader: This is the Lenten journey—to learn to love God and love our neighbors just as Jesus showed us.

All: Our journey teaches us to lose our lives to God as we find and follow Christ in our service to others.

Instead of looking down and limping along, we need to look at those traveling with us. If we are inwardly focused, we are missing God's purpose for us. As Warren pointed out in one of the daily devotionals this past week, God has a lot invested in you. He created you; he shaped you with spiritual gifts and personality; but most important of all, he sent his only son to die for you. One day you will have to face the Lord and have to answer when asked "What did you do with what you were given? How did you use your abilities to serve have others?" Saying "I don't have any abilities" or "I didn't have time" are not acceptable answers. If those are your answers right now, then you have some self-examination to do. First, make a list of what you like to do-- that is what the Post-it in your bulletin is for--; what are you good at? Then acknowledge that God gave you those abilities and dedicate them back to God for serving. Last of all, actually use your abilities and realize that using them is a spiritual responsibility.

Being merely a follower is a whole lot easier than being a follower who serves. Let me ask you something: I think a majority of you sitting here this morning have some experience with or know what Facebook is. New Hope has a Facebook page and I am one of the administrators for it which means I have access to a lot of information. I hate to burst your bubble, but Facebook is not for you to share pictures of your pups or your kids. It is to make money from selling those ads that pop up and annoy you. In its ads to get people to open Facebook accounts, Facebook claims it builds community and people should join a community. So, more followers means a better community, right? Take a guess how many followers New Hope has-- 246 followers. I read through the list and recognized maybe a third of the names. And it is not even close to the official membership of 85 that I reported in the year end statistical report to the West Ohio Conference for New Hope. Just clicking on "likes" and occasional comments doesn't really seem to be building real community or there wouldn't be a seat left in the sanctuary this morning. I have to admit, if we didn't put the service on Facebook for our shutins or save it to our videos so our friend Gene who is a missionary in Thailand could watch, I wouldn't even have a Facebook account. I don't think anybody really cares if I get a different haircut, make a good looking dessert, or go out to eat somewhere.

Because Facebook is actually a marketing tool, I can see how long someone watches the service if they are not watching in real time and actually worshipping with us. This year the conference report asked how many people on the average were in worship physically and how many were in worship virtually. There was some discussion about how to count those watching on Facebook and I am sure a lot of churches reported what Facebook lists as "The Reach" of a posting. Last week we had a reach of 148. Wow! -- but that is not the number I reported. I reported the 4 who were in the entire service. Do you want to know why? The next thing Facebook lists is how long the average watch time was. Take a guess how long the average watch time is --3 seconds. That must be pretty powerful worshipping if you can do it in 3 seconds. I don't think so.

Being part of the body of Christ requires more than 3 seconds of time. Building real community is being present to lay hands on a person who is being anointed for healing before surgery, praying with each other, singing with each other, and taking communion with each other. Building community means actually doing something to serve when needs are presented. It is more than just putting something in the tornado relief envelope or sending a card to the shutins who are on the list in your bulletin. It means being here to serve a dinner to a grieving family. It means filling plastic eggs for an egg hunt and providing a lunch for all who come. It means helping clean up after we have a meal, not just fellowship and head out. It means stepping up to help with Vacation Bible School, to provide junior church; to help as a technician in the booth; to be a scripture reader on Sundays; being in Bible study with others discuss the Word; serving meals at Alpha Center, providing kits for Festival of Sharing. It means providing for the needs of those at Rustic Hope and gift bags at Christmas time for students. It could mean showing hospitality on April 8 eclipse day by opening up the church to those who are planning to come and watch from our parking lot. -- we have already gotten the calls wanting to know if they can come and how much are we going to charge. They are coming, but why should we charge when God's handiwork is what is putting on the show? How many more needs could be met if everyone used even one of their abilities to serve others both inside and outside these walls? As our friends Soul'd Out reminded us in song the other night, a little more Jesus and a little less me!

In addition to Facebook, I also manage the website and get a report from Google every month on how many visitors we get. In February, 60 people landed on our website and read about us; 44 clicked on the link to get directions for where to find us here on the corner of Mason and Patterson-Halpin roads. The Greeks who want to meet Jesus are right here. When they come, will they meet Jesus here? Will they find servants who are willing to serve or just Facebook followers? I can't answer that one for you, The answer to that is one you will have to answer. I know that when the Lord asks that question of me, I want to be able to answer that I appreciated all that was invested in me by serving in as many ways as I could each and every day until the day I die. Let us pray:

Prayer:

God of the ages, we acknowledge that most of the time, we are clinging tightly to what we have, afraid we might lose something we need and afraid somehow there won't be enough to live our lives the way we want to. The scarcity mindset overtakes us, and it robs us of the joy of serving you. Remind us that Jesus has called us to be ready to let go of this life so that we might claim the abundance of life eternal. In our redeemer's name, we pray. Amen