

John 12:20-33
March 18, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” This was the request, John tells us, of some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem during the Passover festival. The signs and wonders Jesus had been doing clearly were spreading, drawing more and more people to come and see him. His teaching and preaching was being passed down from person to person gently moving more people to come and follow. It seemed like such a simple request but we are never told they actually got to see Jesus. Instead, we hear Jesus tell Andrew and Philip, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Our text concludes with Jesus stating, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” John adds the line, “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die” just to clarify.

We, too, wish to see Jesus. I often ponder why so many people don't believe in Jesus or don't see the need to come to worship. Yet, then I try and put myself in the position of someone completely new to Christianity. Perhaps, having never entered the doors of a church building before. Not fully knowing what they might see; yet, knowing something has drawn them there. It's a huge step – that first one – to enter the doors of a church building, walk in, and have many eyes

upon you. What is it they see? What is that we see? There are many things but first and foremost is a cross. In some cases, a cross is even found on the outside before they walk in the doors. In some cases, they see a crucifix, which is a cross with Jesus' body hanging on it.

I suspect some may have never heard of the cross before and don't know it is was the most brutal form of torture and death used by the Roman government in antiquity. And just what if that someone walked in today and heard this text. Here they come, wanting to see Jesus and they hear him utter words that when he dies on a cross he will be glorified. Will they stay? Will they return?

So many of us have simply grown up in the church from infancy. The cross has always been there. We have heard the story time and time again about Jesus's death and we know the glory Jesus refers to continues through his resurrection and ascension. Yet, for those entering the church for the first time I wonder how they hear this story? How they see the cross? Is it good news?

We know many are drawn to Christ and to church following some heartache in their life. Perhaps, the death of a loved one or one more horrific tragedy playing out in the news or on social media right before our eyes. Or possibly following the diagnosis of an illness or the loss of a job. Yet, then they see a cross and hear how this Jesus, who is supposed to help them, has died on that

very cross. In their time of need sensing a God of power to set things right and give them hope to move forward they instead hear God's Son say that through his death he will be glorified. Will they return? Would I return I wonder?

Yet, Jesus says that when he is lifted up he will draw all people to himself. I ventured across this story today, which appears to be from Reverend Will Willimon. (*Will Willimon's Pulpit Resource* Vol. 46, No. 1, Year B; Abingdon Press, 2017; p.35) He writes:

Right after I finished seminary, I was forced to take a clinical quarter of CPE. That's when a budding pastor is assigned to some clinical situation in a chaplaincy position. You work under the supervision of some experienced chaplain who guides you in ministry to those in need.

My first day, I was assigned as a chaplain to a woman who was in the last stages of lung cancer. I entered her hospital room with a cheery, "Good morning!"

She cursed me and told me she didn't want any blankety-blank-blank chaplain hanging around her. I left.

The head nurse told me, "She's addicted to cigarettes. That how she got this fix. She's not allowed to smoke by herself. If you go back and tell her that you are willing to sit wither her while she sucks on those cancer sticks, she will let you stay."

I gulped but did just that. She let me stay, and I sat there watching her inhale the smoke that was causing her death. Between her gasps, she told me that she had been raised as a Catholic, but she despised the church and hadn't been in a Catholic church in years.

In the subsequent weeks (I visited her and watched her smoke at least twice a day), she told me about her childhood. Her cancer seemed a sad way for her rather sad life to end. Repeatedly she told me about her anger

at the church. No friends or family ever visited her, so far as I know. Each day she became weaker as the cancer made it more difficult for her to breathe.

Then one day, between gasps, she asked, “Can you get me a crucifix?”

“Er, uh, I guess so. I’m a Protestant, but I’m sure I can find a way to get you a crucifix. Why do you want a crucifix?” I asked.

“None of your business,” she gasped.

I got her a crucifix on a string of rosary beads and presented it to her. She took it without comment. In all my succeeding visits, I found her clutching that crucifix to her chest as her chest heaved up and down in labored breathing.

On the next to the last day before she slipped into a coma, she said to me unexpectedly, “You know” – gasp – “why I want this?” Gasp.

“I would really like to know,” I said.

“He, he has been there,” she said, lifting the tiny figure of Christ on the cross. “He’s been there. He knows.” Gasp. “There’s nothin’ that they done to me,” gasp, “that they didn’t do,” gasp, “to him. He knows.”

She died two days later with Christ on the cross clutched in her hands. I said that she asked me to go find her a crucifix. I think it’s more accurate for me to say that Christ on the cross, Christ the crucified, found her.

I didn’t grow up in a church with a large crucifix, Christ the crucified, over our altar. But maybe I should have. That suffering woman could look at the crucifix and see God. She, who wanted to see hope, who longed to see the point of it all, saw Jesus, Jesus on a cross, like a great magnet drawing the suffering, needy ones to himself.

After reading this story it struck me just how God, through Jesus, and his cross is able to draw people to himself. In the words of that dying woman, “He’s been there. He knows.” We often think folks come for the

first time or return for the second time because of big screens with uplifting videos and songs flashing across them, or a pastor who can walk around and proclaim a feel good story about how God is going to solve every problem we have. It's easy to fall into this trap and I find myself doing it from time to time. Yet, then we falter to give God the glory and trust that through the cross Jesus does in fact draw people unto himself. He meets them in their time of need. He has been through what they are going through. We often make the assumption they are looking for a God of power to cure whatever ails them or make things right in their lives; however, they more often know their situation is what it is. The cancer won't go away. Their loved one won't come back. They won't walk out the doors and instantaneously find the dream job they have always wanted. No, they simply want to know they aren't alone. God knows what they are experiencing. The cross reveals that and the resurrection seals the deal that what they are enduring will not have the final say. It is good news. Sometimes, we simply have to get out of the way and let Jesus draw all people to himself. Amen.