

Lent 5 B  
John 12:20-33  
March 17, 2024

*“To See”*

Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 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. Whoever serves me, God will honour.*

*‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“God, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. God, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.*

~o~

“We wish to see Jesus.” It seems like a simple enough request, doesn’t it? After all, John tells us that Jesus had just arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He had been received by a great crowd waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in

the name of the Lord!” He was attracting so much attention that the Pharisees, hardly Jesus’ biggest fans, threw up their hands in exasperation exclaiming, “Look, the world has gone after him!” His arrival in Jerusalem wasn’t exactly subtle. He had apparently gathered a crowd once again and was teaching when these Greeks, these non-Jewish persons, had arrived.

Could they not *see* him there, teaching quite publicly before the crowd? Were they hoping for more: a personal introduction, time for a face to face, a 1<sup>st</sup> century selfie or an autographed rock? We really can’t know. All we can do is take them at their word. “We want to see Jesus.”

Is it really such a different request than what we hear elsewhere in John’s gospel? After his burial and resurrection, we hear Mary Magdalene begging one she believed to be the gardener to show her where he had laid Jesus’ body. After the other disciples saw the resurrected Jesus, Thomas declared that he wouldn’t believe unless he saw Jesus for himself. We even hear the Jesus of John’s gospel issue a warning about seeing. He says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Despite these words, we all want to see Jesus, don’t we?

Since the European Enlightenment of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, a desire to see, to know the ‘real’ Jesus of history has motivated countless scholars to spend innumerable hours on research and compose myriad volumes on the subject of the historical Jesus.

In his recent book on the historical Jesus, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, author Reza Aslan concludes that Jesus was a “revolutionary zealot who walked across Galilee gathering an army of disciples with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, [a] magnetic preacher who defied the authority of the Temple priesthood in

Jerusalem, [a radical Jewish nationalist who challenged the Roman occupation and lost.”<sup>1</sup>

In his book, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, scholar John Dominic Crossan posits that “the historical Jesus was . . . a *peasant Jewish Cynic*” whose strategy “was the combination of *free healing and common eating*, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power.”<sup>2</sup>

And in yet another volume on the historical Jesus, French physician and theologian Albert Schweitzer concludes in an almost melancholy tone that “[t]he study of the Life of Jesus . . . set out in a quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour . . . But He does not stay; He passes by our time and returns to His own . . . [he] will not suffer himself to be modernized as a historical figure . . . He comes to us as One unknown.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the ultimate unknowability of the historical Jesus, it has not stopped people from trying to see him. Over the centuries and still today, people have seen Jesus as rabbi, prophet, Lord, Messiah, God, model-human, zealot, Cynic, reformer, revolutionary, friend, and ultimate therapist. One author even compared Jesus to a modern CEO!

The truth is, though, we all want to see Jesus. Unfortunately, what people often end up seeing in Jesus is a reflection of themselves. So, what are we to do? The Jesus of John’s gospel responds to the request of the Greeks by telling the crowd that, “unless a grain of wheat falls onto the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” While rooted in the agricultural knowledge of his day, we understand Jesus’ words to mean that unless the stalk of wheat dies and

---

<sup>1</sup> Reza Aslan: *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, (Random House, 2013), 215-216.

<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan: *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, (Harper, 1991), 421-422.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Schweitzer. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. and C. Black, 1911), 259.

the dormant kernels drop from the head of the stalk to the soil below, a new plant cannot sprout, grow, and bear fruit.

While I'm sure that the Greeks appreciated the ag lesson, they had come to see Jesus. Whatever *seeing* meant for them, it's just a hunch that all this talk about wheat wasn't what they had in mind. But, in a roundabout way, I think Jesus was attempting to give them what they came for.

Far from being a farming lesson, Jesus' response is a metaphor. In fact, I believe it's a double metaphor. First, it is a metaphor for Jesus himself. He was, once again, prefiguring his crucifixion with himself as the wheat that would have to die (by crucifixion) in order to bear fruit (resurrection).

Second, I believe this is a metaphor for us too. Like the wheat, we are invited to die to self, to fall into community, to root in the Good News, to sprout, and grow, and bear fruit. By way of response to the Greeks who wanted to see him, Jesus points them through death and rebirth and finally to the fruit. These Greeks want to see Jesus and Jesus points them to the fruit. And that's exactly where I believe we can, and do, and will see Jesus too. We see Jesus in the fruit.

All the theological and Christological Jesus talk in the world doesn't really clear up the question of who Jesus was as a historical person. It's the fruit of Jesus' followers that paints the clearest picture. After his death, the scrappy band of followers grew from frightened observers to emboldened evangelists. They shared the good news of the kingdom of God by healing sick peasants, challenging corrupt religious officials, and speaking truth to power within the Roman Empire. And despite its infamy among the religious elite and the occupying Roman forces, the Jesus movement was one of the major forces responsible for toppling the corrupt and oppressive Roman Empire. We see Jesus in the fruit. And that's still the best place to look.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jesus' followers and Christian churches are still the best chance folks have to really see Jesus. But they're only going to see

him if we're bearing fruit. What fruit are you bearing that points people beyond yourself for a glimpse of Jesus? What fruit are we at New England Church bearing that points people beyond our church for a glimpse of Jesus?

I believe that the Greek's request still sounds loudly in our world today: We wish to see Jesus. The question for us is simple: Will we show them?

May it be so. Amen.