

We Want to See Jesus

John 12:20-33

March 21, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

Most of you know that I spent a lot of years before I came to Luling as a guest preacher. I preached at lots of different churches—if I had to guess, I'd say around 20. Every church is different, every congregation is different, even the pulpits are different. Pulpits can hide a lot of things in their various shelves and nooks and crannies. Leftover props from children's sermons, out of date bulletin inserts, offering envelopes. A thoughtfully stocked pulpit will have cough drops, a package of tissues, and either matches or a lighter of some kind. Some pulpits have steps to stand on for those who are shorter than others. The pulpit in the chapel at Trinity University—and I think the one at First Presbyterian in San Antonio, too--has a floor with a hydraulic lift, to get the preacher at just the right height. Lots of them have pieces of paper with words taped to the pulpit itself. Frequently it's the words to the Apostles' Creed or Lord's Prayer, which reassures me that I'm not the only preacher to forget the next phrase, mid-recitation. Sometimes it is more mundane, like "turn off the microphone" or "remember to push record."

In lots of pulpits, though, there is a plaque or engraving or even a piece of paper with scotch tape that uses this verse from John. "We want to see Jesus." It's supposed to remind the preacher, above all, that the listeners to the sermon have come to see Jesus in their midst. Not so much the intricate points of a Greek verb and its translation into English, not how one Gospel compares to another, not the literary themes of the Old Testament prophets. But Jesus. That's what we are to preach. In the words of Paul, *"I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."* (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). We want to see Jesus.

That's what the Greeks say to Philip. "We want to see Jesus." Philip goes to tell Andrew, and then they both go to tell Jesus. Just a small detour backwards in the Gospel of John. When Jesus called Andrew as a disciple, he used the words "Come and see," and when he called Philip, he said, "Follow me." Seeing, in the Gospel of John, is about discipleship and about belief. We want to see Jesus, we want to believe in Jesus.

So it would be a lovely story if Philip passed on this request to Andrew, and then they went together to tell Jesus that some Greeks wanted to see him, and he said, "Of course. Bring them over. Why did you even need to ask?" That's what I would expect Jesus to say, anyway. It's not what he said.

Instead, Jesus never addresses the Greeks, and they don't appear again, unless it's by some other name. Jesus for the first time says that his hour has come. He has repeatedly said that his hour had not yet come, but now it has. It's not clear at all if the Greeks' question prompted this, or if it just was. He talks about his glorification, a voice comes from heaven to talk about glorification, and then he talks about being lifted up from the earth and drawing all people to himself. Then the narrator says that Jesus said all this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

It gets a little heavy just from "We want to see Jesus," doesn't it? It reminds me of the places in the other gospels where Peter proclaims loudly and confidently that Jesus is the Messiah. Immediately, Jesus begins to talk about his suffering and death, and Peter objects just as loudly and confidently. Peter's idea of Messiah and the reality of who Jesus was don't match. And Peter isn't ready to follow a Messiah who will suffer and die.

And so I wonder about those Greeks. And us, too. "We want to see Jesus." But do we really? Do we want to see the idea of Jesus that we have made for ourselves, rather than the Jesus who really is? Do we want to see the Jesus that heals people and welcomes children and turns water into wine and feeds the 500 and turn aside from the Jesus that turns over the tables in the temple and suffers in vulnerability on the cross at the hands of the empire? Or maybe it's the other way around for some of us. Maybe we're ok with the Jesus who strikes out at injustice in the Temple and speaks out against the powerful so strongly that he is crucified. And we'd rather not look too closely at Jesus's teachings and indiscriminate and indiscreet conversation partners. It's easy, so so so easy, to focus on the parts of Jesus that we like and so so so easy to turn away from the parts of Jesus that make us uncomfortable. Do we want to see Jesus in the least of these, the hungry and poor and imprisoned? Do we want to see Jesus in those who are different than us? Do we want to see Jesus in the face of those who are a different race than us? This is one of those weeks when we've been confronted with that question anew. Do we want to see Jesus in the face of the one who killed 8 people? Do we want to see Jesus in those obnoxious people on the internet who are so clearly wrong? We want to see Jesus. But do we? Do we really want to see all of Jesus?

Seeing Jesus is more complicated than the Greeks might have thought. More complicated than we might like it to be. And following Jesus even more so.

We want to see Jesus. We want to believe Jesus. We want to trust Jesus. We want to follow Jesus, even to the cross. We want to want all that. We want to try all that. We want to be able to want to see Jesus, all of Jesus, everywhere he leads us. May God give us the courage to want to see Jesus, really and truly.