

A Grain of Wheat Finds Glory *John 12:20-36*

Last week, Gail Galfo compared the four gospels that tell us the story of Jesus to the multiple camera angles the networks use to show us a replay of what goes on in a football game. And it's an apt description. Look at an event from multiple angles and you're likely to see something you wouldn't have caught first glance on the main camera. But if the gospels are four cameras each catching Jesus from a different angle, then John has set up in an entirely different part of the stadium than the other three. As Gail pointed out last week, in his gospel John ignores shots the other gospels feature, and he films things the other gospels ignore.

John's opening shot on Palm Sunday is like the rest, Jesus on a donkey colt being welcomed into the holy city like one of old Israel's kings. But instead of filming Jesus in tears at the city gate, or Jesus storming the temple stairs to tear apart the temple market, John focuses in on a group of rabbi's observing the crowd, perched on the parade route like crows on a wall, and then in John's gospel one of the rabbi's throws up his hands and announces to the rest, "*See! You're getting nowhere, the whole world has gone after him!*"

And then, in John's gospel, the camera fades to black and John records nothing of most of the rest of the day! The screen springs to life again hours later. Most of the drama seems done. The crowd has settled into the kind of murmur crowds make between the action, and, out on the edge of the crowd, Philip, one of Jesus' oldest friends, gets his sleeve yanked by someone leading a number of Greek strangers through the temple square. Gail noted last week, Philip would have been a good choice for a cadre of Greeks trying to find Jesus. His name is Greek and Philip is from the border country in Galilee where lots of Greeks live.

So Philip is sympathetic enough to try the idea out on Andrew and together they escort the Greek inquirers to the corner of the temple square where Jesus had settled. And strangely Jesus takes one look at these strangers and begins to act like he'd been waiting for them all day. They say hello and Jesus answers, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified! Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*"

It had to be a stunning moment for everyone in earshot in whatever corner of the city Jesus had settled by then. It is not the sort of talk you'd expect from a man who had been greeted like royalty that morning. But Jesus kept going along the same lines: "*Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me, and where I am, there my servant will be also.*" Now I think, that late in the day, once all the sound and fury has been spent, Jesus is in the company of his disciples, and he wants his disciples to understand what saving the whole world is going to entail.

The last thing John had shown us from the Palm Sunday parade was old Israel's rabbi's perched like crows along the parade route, despairing in their hearts that the whole world looked about to follow Jesus. They may have even seen Greeks in the crowd, trying to catch up to Jesus and the disciples. But now that the Greeks are here, Jesus wants his disciples to know what saving Greeks and Romans and Germans and Celts is going to cost. First of all, it's going to cost them Jesus. He is the grain that will be planted and die so that God can bring a harvest of human children into heaven at the end of the age.

Jesus has been teaching that to anyone with ears to hear all through John's gospel. But now Jesus adds that our knowing him and loving him and serving him in this life will involve our renouncing wants and needs and desires and dreams so that people can be reached and God's kingdom can be built in the places where we live and among the people we hope to help. "*Whoever loves his life loses it*" Jesus taught. The Greek verb here is more powerful than most translators want to make it.

"*Whoever loves his life destroys it,*" is what Jesus actually said. In other words, when we put something or someone from this world ahead of Christ, we destroy the happiness we thought we would gain. Jesus went on: "*...whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*" In John and in other gospels, Jesus repeatedly teaches that certain things must be hated if ever we will save our souls. John himself will teach us in his first letter: "*Do not love the world, nor the things of the world. For all that is in the world, the lusts of the flesh, and the lusts of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life is not from the Father but from the world.*"

But from the same author, John, we've already read: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...*". So Jesus didn't hate the world in any absolute sense. To the contrary, Jesus waxed on and on about how God clothed the lilies with more beauty and color than Solomon could find in his wardrobe. And Jesus didn't hate his life, he loved teaching people to be good and wise and happy, he loved the company of the men and women who left their lives to follow him and learn his gospel.

Here on Palm Sunday, Jesus speaks as if his life is worth living, "*Now is my soul troubled*" Jesus says, by what it will cost him to keep faith with his Father and save a whole world of people his Father loves. So the hatred Jesus talks about here and other places is born of the necessity to choose. Jesus here teaches us to hate our lives when our wants and needs and dreams would keep us from God and what's right. So he teaches the disciples in the temple square, "*If anyone serves me, he must follow me, and where I am, there my servant will be also. If anyone serves me, my Father will honor him.*"

In other words, the way to follow Jesus now is to get where Jesus would want us to be, to do what Jesus would want us to do. This is what pleases the Father, this is a way of life the Father will honor on Judgment Day. It troubles Jesus to die as a young man, to let go of his life in a world filled with beauty and friendship and things to do that matter. But he won't pray for his Father to save him from the mission the Father sent him to do. Rather Jesus prays to be used by his Father in a way that ultimately expresses the Father's goodness and wisdom. "*Father, glorify your name!*" Jesus cries out in a prayer only his Father understands.

And the heavens rumble into life in response. Most of the people there only heard thunder, some of them were convinced that an angel had answered Jesus. But John heard the Father answer Jesus in words, "*I have glorified my name, and I will glorify it again!*" In other words, all the twists and turns of human history, the wonders and tragedies, what is uplifting and what is absurd at the end of the day will all add up in a way that expresses the goodness and wisdom and power of the Almighty.

Jesus is going to die, but history is not out of control. And Jesus says as much to the disciples around him: "*Now is the judgment of the world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself!*" Before the week is out, the people in that temple square will witness a bloody, terrifying crucifixion. It will look for all the world like Jesus has lost everything. But in fact, his death will set in motion a chain of events that will undo all the harm the devil ever meant us. Forgiveness and life and power and goodness for every soul who will throw in with Christ.

From the moment our sins are atoned for, Satan will become a goner. He'll still make noise, he'll cause a degree of trouble, but with sins atoned for and God's Spirit on the loose, Satan can't win. Jesus knows his death will "draw," his sacrifice will create traction so that people from everywhere, Jews and Greeks, Africans and Asians and people from the rest of the "*whole world*" will find forgiveness and healing and wholeness and power because Jesus gave up all those things to see them given to us. The disciples can't quite wrap their minds around what Christ is saying. All the prophecies they want to read show them a Messiah leading a victory parade. Nobody gets taken away from them, nobody gets lifted up on any crossbeams.

But the sun has started to set on Palm Sunday, so Jesus brings things back down to the basics: "*The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light lest darkness overtake you.*" In other words, the critical thing is not to understand the whole gospel in a single gulp. The critical thing is take to heart the light God gives us and to keep looking for more. Because none of us knows how much time we have to learn Christ's gospel. The people in that square only had a few days left in the company of Jesus. They needed to believe, trust him before the sun went down. So he warned them, "*While you have the light, believe in the light so that you may become children of light.*"

Mid-Week Devotional

Do Not Love the World

"Do not love the world, nor the things of the world.

*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes,
and the boastful pride of life is not from the Father but from the world.*

And the world is passing away, and also its lusts, but whoever who does the will of the Father abides forever."

1 John 2:15-17

John appears to have been the youngest of Jesus' apostles, and yet he was prominent among the Twelve, close to Jesus during his earthly ministry, close to Peter in the years just after the Resurrection and Pentecost (John 13:21-30 Acts 3,4,8). But after those early years, history falls silent on what became of John until after his brother, James, and then Peter and Paul were martyred, and probably until after Jerusalem was destroyed a full generation after the events we read about from John's gospel on Sunday.

Then, suddenly, near the end of his life John indulged in a flurry of writing, a gospel, three letters, and an account of visions that echoed what Daniel had seen in Babylon, centuries before. In his first letter, John, like Jesus before him, warns his readers not to "...*love the world or the things of the world.*" Faith in Christ involves a degree of separation from the world because the world relentlessly draws us toward things that draw us away from Christ and our duty in his kingdom. John warns us against "...*the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life.*"

The lust of the flesh are those desires that make our immediate satisfaction the center of our attention. The lust of the eyes are those things that shine and shimmer and flash so as to draw our attention away from the invisible God and the principles and disciplines he stands for. The boastful pride of life are those desires for vindication and exaltation that cause us to forget our place in God's economy. When we want to have more than we get and to be more than we are, we elbow God off center stage and hoard for ourselves acclaim and loyalty that rightfully belongs to him (Acts 12:1-23).

It has been suggested that the three lusts John warns against were drawn from what Genesis tells us the woman saw in the forbidden fruit, that it was "...*good for food, and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom.*" (Genesis 3:6). To this day, the world will often shimmer and shine to the point of distraction, but the reality, John tells us, is that the world is "*fading away*," while Christ and his kingdom are dawning with a brilliance that outshines the world's temporary flash.