

“A Collage of Grace”
Lent 5b
John 12:20-33

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March 29, 2009

In Jesus' Name.

The Evangelist John had an ear for ironic statements. For example, Caiaphas, the chief priest and no friend of Jesus, said to the other high priests, “It is better for you to have one man die for the people....” Precisely, but not in the way Caiaphas intended. John concluded Caiaphas must have been inspired by the Holy Spirit to say such a thing.

Another example comes at Jesus' trial. Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” The truth was right in front of him and he didn't recognize it. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

We see another example of irony after Jesus made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The Pharisees said to one another, “Look, the world has gone after him!” They didn't mean it literally. However, in the very next verse, the one that begins our Gospel reading today, we hear some Greeks came to Philip asking, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” The whole world was beginning to go after him. Philip relayed the request to Andrew. Together they went to tell Jesus. You might remember that Philip and Andrew had important roles to play at the beginning of John's gospel in the calling of disciples. “Come and see” was the invitation to discipleship there as well.

One commentator called our Gospel passage today a narrative collage (Valerie Bridgeman Davis). I know what a collage is but I looked up the word hoping to find it has its roots in noble and grand things. Not so. It comes from the French word for glue, which of course is how we make a collage. This sounds like a confirmation class assignment from about 1970. The teacher came with piles of old magazines and odd bits of craft supplies, such as toothpicks, pipe cleaners, and squeeze bottles of Elmer's Glue. She gave these out along with the instructions to make a collage about John 12:20-33. If this gospel passage is a narrative collage, at this point we are looking for pictures of all different sorts of people. We shall have to look beyond Good Housekeeping with its pictures of people who look like us. We shall have to look also in National Geographic with its pictures of people who appear foreign to us. We shall have to find pictures not only of Americans in our jeans and t-shirts, but also Africans in flowing robes, stylishly dressed Parisians, and the children of the slums, making their living by picking through the piles of refuse. Some people call these children refuse. What began with these few Greeks has indeed spread, so that now, as the Pharisees said, all the world has gone after him.

It is a remarkable thing that all these people are drawn to Jesus and to the new covenant, the new agreement, God drafts for us with Jesus. It is not natural. The natural thing is to gather

with our own kind. Tribalism is written into our DNA. We, by nature, gather with those who look like us, think they way we do, have the same opinions on politics and social issues, have similar educations and incomes. There is something about Jesus and this new covenant or new testament (testament being another word for covenant) that causes people to do what is unnatural. Or maybe, just maybe, Jesus creates in us a new nature.

At any rate, at this point we might think the collage is about the whole world going after Jesus. But we get only one corner of the poster board pasted in with these pictures. Philip and Andrew bring it to Jesus to see if they are on the right track. “Is this what you mean? Is this what you want us to do? Some Greeks have come wanting to see you.” Jesus response does not seem to track. It seems he is off on a different subject. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” he said. He has spent eleven chapters telling people his hour has not yet come. Something about the arrival of these foreigners triggers the change.

The Old Testament is filled with talk about the Day of the Lord when God will set everything right. One of the marks of that day is the ingathering of all the peoples of the earth to God. On that day says the prophet Isaiah, “The Lord will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.... And he will destroy... the shroud that is cast over all peoples... he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.”

When these foreigners gather to Jesus, that signals to him “The hour has come for the Son of Man, for this man to be glorified,” to set in motion all those promises about the day of the Lord. In our collage making we might set to work finding pictures of glorious things. However, before we start paging through old issues of *Money* and *Architectural Digest* looking for stories about Donald Trump we know enough to know our ideas about what is glorious may not square with God’s ideas. Indeed the next narrative in this collage is about farming, a most inglorious endeavor. So, put aside the issues of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* and find copies of the *Farm Journal* and *Progressive Farmer* and cut out pictures of planting and harvesting. Can we find one that shows a single kernel of wheat that buried in the ground yields a stalk of wheat bearing a harvest of 60 and 100 grains?

In the next narrative in the collage Jesus says, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Jesus is not advocating we literally hate our lives. The Word did not become flesh and dwell among us out of hatred for life. He does, however, get our attention with this strong language. He means to draw a sharp

contrast. I think what Jesus is after is illustrated by the perspective on Christian music I read about this past week. The writer says he judges the value of a Christian song by “how often it uses the first person pronouns, ‘I, me, and my.’” He goes on to say, “I was exposed to a song the other day that repeated the phrase, ‘I want.’ ‘I want to be near you... I want to love you... I want to know you....’ This is so typical of our culture, a world in which everything is defined on the basis of what I want, of what I desire” (William Willimon).

The stark contrast Jesus draws is between the old nature and the new nature Jesus creates in us. The old nature looks out for number 1. It is all about what I want and what I desire. Number 1 always ends in the grave, so good luck with that. The new nature serves Jesus and therefore follows him. Jesus tells us where to look for pictures for this portion of the collage. Jesus says, “Where I am, there will my servant be also.” Where have we seen Jesus? Rewind the story. We saw him in the wilderness where he was baptized by John. In the wilderness he began calling together disciples to follow him. These were people who otherwise would not have anything to do with each other, a tax collector and a revolutionary, peasant fishermen and patrician Pharisees like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and now these Greeks. By the old nature they would have kept their distance from each other or killed each other. We were with Jesus when he struck up a conversation at the well with the Samaritan woman. There is a hint of scandal about her and there has always been lurid gossip about Mary Magdala though Scripture says nothing to warrant such talk. We saw him with the lame man by the pool of Bethesda. He went out of his way to approach the man born blind. Even Jesus’ disciples assumed he was blind because of some sin or other. So we page through the periodicals looking for pictures of people in need, outcast and dejected. They are easy to find. Jesus promises he is present wherever people are suffering. We are to follow him to these people and places.

Jesus clearly is talking about his death. Is Jesus telling us we must follow him even there? Yes, we must follow him especially there. We followed him to his grave when we were baptized and we follow him there every time the old nature rises up in us in rebellion against the new nature. We follow Jesus to the grave, putting that old nature to death by confession again and again. We rise with him to new life, his nature renewed in us. This is why I say every act of confession and forgiveness is a return to the waters of baptism where we are joined to Jesus in his death and resurrection.

When all the cutting and pasting is done we stand back from our creation and see this narrative collage, John 12:20-33, is about the new nature, Jesus’ own nature, created in us and lived out in the community of faith. The collage is of a community gathered in worship and at a

Lenten supper, a family lingering after dinner to give their fifth grader the opportunity to lead a family devotion as she prepares to receive her first communion, and a group of people serving at the community food pantry on Saturday, others meeting on Monday to plan sponsorship for a refugee family, people traveling out to New Orleans, Slovakia and Africa to lend a hand and simply experience being the body of Christ with people in circumstances different from our own. What we see finally in this collage is the grace of God at work among us and through us.