

The Pillars of Jesus' Mission

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Texts:

- Jeremiah 31:31-34
- Hebrews 5:5-10
- John 12:20-33

In the text from John's gospel today we see Jesus perform a creative activity like a miracle and hear Him describe two great pillars of his mission.

The passage begins curiously. We see an appearance of a rare species in the Gospels—namely, some Gentiles. These Greeks who desire to talk with Jesus are Gentiles, not Jews; actually, they are proselytes. They believe in the God of the Jews; they worship in their own section of the Temple; but they have not decided to undergo circumcision and convert to Judaism. John introduces them into the narrative using three verses, which in the New Testament is a lot of real estate. And then, at the end of the story, they seem to have disappeared. Why does he use three verses to introduce them? And then, at the end, why does he drop them, when we would expect them mentioned again?

I believe the reason is that Jesus was not really supposed to be conversing with Gentiles. Even proselytes. John wishes to assure his readers that there is a good reason why Gentiles were in this instance allowed to talk with Jesus—namely, that they had connections. Even in the 1st century, it's who you know. These Greeks seems to know Philip, who clears it with Andrew and together they decide to make the introductions. In addition, John reminds us that Philip is from Bethsaida in Galilee—and there is another potential connection. Galilee was called "Galilee of the Gentiles" and the reader might assume that these Greeks knew Philip from Galilee.

In any case, in speaking to the Greeks—and there's no reason to assume they aren't present--we see Jesus perform an activity *like* a miracle; namely; He creates friendship. It is important that Jesus creates friendship because otherwise I'm not sure Jesus would have friends—and I mean that will all reverence. Look at who He is—He is demanding; He tends to say hard things even to those closest to Him; He has no conception of a "comfort zone" and one doubts if He will always be there for

you. Just in the previous chapter we hear from both Martha and Mary that if Jesus had been present, their brother Lazarus would not have died. The friendship we have with Jesus is friendship He creates miraculously, just as He did elsewhere in the John's Gospel: with Nicodemus, with the woman at the well, with Martha, Mary and Lazarus, and most especially with His disciples.

Given that, we see in this passage the kindness and generosity of Jesus as He creates friendship with these Greeks. Notice that in this passage there is no mention of the Law or the Prophets, no talk of Jewish history, of the Sabbath or circumcision, of Pharisees or even the Temple. He speaks of profound things but speaks in a way that these Gentiles will understand. He creates friendship appropriate for these Gentiles. In the same way we find that He is creating friendship with us as well, appropriate to this church, to this time, and to our own uniqueness. For Jesus is not afraid of our uniqueness. Holy Week is a great time to contemplate this friendship.

In this friendship—brief as it is--what does Jesus tell these Gentiles? He summarizes why He came. He explains two great pillars of His mission. The first pillar is what we might call "Sacrifice and Exaltation"; the second is about eschatology. "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies," He tells them, "it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." He is referring to His own death. He knows now how He will die—by crucifixion—and He understands that His death, although of supreme importance in the economy of God, will also entail enormous pain and humiliation. As He put it, it was for this hour that He came. His death *is* the brief history of time. It is the resolution to sin and punishment. It is the epicenter of meaning is the event by which God reconciled to Himself all things and made peace. At the heart of the miracle of friendship with Jesus is the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf.

It is not a sacrifice to which we can contribute but only accept. Despite our devotion, despite our giving of time or our money, despite all our busyness for ministry and our brokenness and contriteness of heart—the sacrifice of Jesus is final and we, though we might abandon ourselves to Jesus, add nothing to it. As the Book of Hebrews puts it, where sins have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. On Good Friday we celebrate this final sacrifice and this abject humiliation of God. Sacrifice, then, is the first pillar of the mission of Jesus the Messiah.

Sacrifice and humiliation, however, is not the final word for the pillar of sacrifice. For it is the pillar of exaltation as well. Jesus predicts that He will be lifted up from the earth, to draw all people to Himself and to glorify the name of the Father. God verifies this Himself in a voice that sounded like an angel or like thunder: “I have glorified my name, and I will glorify it again.” After the humiliation of the cross comes the glorification and exaltation of the resurrection.

The second great pillar of the mission of Jesus is His ministry of eschatology. “Eschatos” is just the Greek way of saying “the last” or “the end.” So now, when a Greek speaker cuts in front of you in line at Safeway you can say, “Hey, to the eschatos, buddy.” While some parts of the modern-day church are obsessed with eschatology as it relates to the *second* coming of Jesus the Messiah, the Bible relates eschatology much more to the *first* coming of Jesus. In the first century, the Jews had a very complex set of expectations around what would happen when Messiah came: they called it the Day of the Lord; the End of Days; they expected the redemption and victory of the Jewish people; an outpouring of the Spirit; and a new heaven and a new earth. The ministry of Jesus realized some of these expectations completely; other fulfillments had a beginning but won’t be complete until Jesus *does* return again; and still other expectations—such as the victory of the Jewish people over the Romans--may have been misguided and misplaced.

What is key in this passage in John is the apocalyptic language of a showdown. At the end of time, the Jews believed, the evil powers would be vanquished in a mighty battle and Messiah would reign forever. Although the Jews did not believe that Messiah himself would participate in this battle, Jesus made it clear that the time had come for *Him* to deal with the evil in the world. “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” To be sure, the world has continued and the evil of the world has continued. These words about judgment may be strange language to us, but when Jesus goes to battle, something new and wholly different begins. Those who believe understand evil—whether evil without or evil within--in the light of His triumph over it. The victory of Jesus over the evil of the world becomes the context in which we finally recognize the evil of the world for what it is. We can be of good cheer because although in the world we will have tribulation, that tribulation finally only makes sense to us because He has overcome the world. He alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners. In the cross we see the organic connection between Jesus driving out the prince of this world and His drawing all people to Himself.

According to Isaiah, another component of the mission of the Messiah is to set the oppressed free. As we think about companionship with a Palestinian congregation in Israel, we might well consider if that act might lead well to the ongoing fulfilling of that mission. Hearing the Reverend Stan Fowler make a presentation on this proposal, after this service, is a great way to show Jesus we are serious about helping the oppressed free.

Another prophecy regarding eschatology—from the time and writing of Jeremiah-- had to do with the new covenant and the new age in which God would write His law no longer on stone tablets but now on human hearts. It is a time of intimacy and affection. It is the stark contrast to Jesus going to battle, for now He comes with kindness and freshness. And friendship. When Jesus reaches out to these Gentiles, He reaches out in anticipation of the time when Gentiles, too, will be part of the covenant people. “I will put my law within them,” God says through the Jeremiah, “and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they teach one another... for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest.” Holy Week is a time to celebrate this new covenant, in fact, in just a few minutes we will celebrate it when we hear the words from Jesus that “This is my blood of the new covenant.”

This, then, is the offer of Jesus to these Gentiles, just as it is the offer to us. That Jesus will create friendship with those who seek Him out. That the sacrifice of Jesus, the humiliation of God on the cross, is the way by which He takes our place in the judgment poured out on the world. That the appearance of the Messiah at the End of Days meant that the time had come for God to write His law on our hearts in a new intimacy, to wipe away every tear and to say as we celebrate the Eucharist, “this is my blood of the new covenant” and therefore, and in that way, the liberation from all our loneliness.