



“Seeing Jesus”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2009
John 12:20-33 (TNT&P)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The setting for today’s gospel reading is the city of Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover Feast. This was the last Passover that Jesus would celebrate before his crucifixion.

The author of John uses today’s story to telegraph the kind of suffering that Jesus would endure. John also uses this passage to illustrate broadening interest in Jesus’ life and ministry. Prior to this scene, the scope of Jesus’ ministry only includes Israeli Jews. But here in chapter 12, interest in Jesus’ ministry has expanded to include some Greeks, who were possibly members of the Jewish Diaspora home for the holidays, or more likely, Hellenistic Gentiles visiting Jerusalem.

This broader interest in Jesus affirms for John the universal nature of Christ’s mission. Without the Gentile’s embrace of Jesus’ mission, Christianity would likely have died an obscure Jewish sect. So despite the fact that the Greeks make only a cameo appearance in today’s reading, their appearance is symbolically significant.

Another noteworthy feature of today’s reading is how John plays with the concept of “seeing.” In the opening scene, the Greeks ask to see Jesus. In the next, Andrew and Philip (two of the disciples) see Jesus, but they don’t really see him. In fact, none of Jesus’ first followers see him for who he truly is—at least not until after Easter.

Only Jesus sees what the future holds. Only Jesus sees what suffering he will have to endure. Only Jesus sees and understands what his mission and ministry are about on the front side of Easter.

As we continue on our journey through Lent, and strive to see Jesus and comprehend what his ministry and mission are all about, we join in singing together our Musical Meditation, “Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer.”

***Guide me, O my great Re-deem-er, pil-grim through this
bar-ren land; I am weak, but you are might-y;
hold me with your power-ful hand. Bread of heav-en, bread of heav-en,
Feed me till I want no more, feed me till I want no more.***

SCRIPTURE READING

John 12:20-33 (TNT&P)²

Michael Stuber

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 Human One 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 honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father-Mother, 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 judgment 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.

SERMON

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John explains, ". . . among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip . . . and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

We never learn from John or any other biblical writers who these Greeks were, where exactly they were from, and whether their request was granted. We only learn that they were foreigners, most likely Gentiles, and the first Gentiles (in John's gospel) to show an interest in Jesus' ministry and mission.

These Greeks came to see Jesus, perhaps like visitors to any major world city, who've come on business and who are eager to see something different from back home. Jesus had developed a reputation as a healer and a teacher by this time in his life. Perhaps someone in the traveling party suffered an illness or injury, and Jesus to them was the first-century equivalent of a walk-in clinic.

¹ Text: John Huges. Public domain.

² Gold, et. al. *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1995).

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Alternatively, perhaps everyone in the group was in good health, and the travelers were seeking some kind of entertainment. Perhaps Jesus was the best act in town, or if not the best, at least the newest act in town. There were no movie theatres or night clubs in first century Jerusalem. A speaker such as Jesus might have easily drawn a crowd of curiosity seekers who had little personal interest in the content of his message, and lots of interest in him as a phenomenon.

A third possibility is that the Greeks were not just seeking a one-time encounter with Jesus, not merely curious for curiosity sake, but that they were passionate about getting to know this man and joining in his mission. Perhaps they were more like us than they seem—at least at first blush.

Long ago and far away, I served as a Field Education Student (*a.k.a.* a Minister In Training) in a suburban Boston parish, Plymouth Congregational UCC, in Belmont. Much of that field education experience is now a blur to me, but a few memories stand out.

I will not soon forget, for example, the first Sunday that I preached at Plymouth Church. It was the Sunday before Labor Day. It was one of those days of low attendance in New England, much like Columbus Day Weekend, and the Sundays after Christmas and Easter, when seminarians are most likely invited to preach. (The general theory, I believe, was that if we screwed up at least we screwed up in front of a smaller crowd.)

Being the plan-ahead kind of person that I have always striven to be, I arrived at church extra early that particular Sunday to review my sermon and to make sure that the pulpit, microphone, and desk light were set correctly for my height. (You see, my mentor, Steve Garvey was several inches shorter than me, and he had recently been outfitted with bifocals. I wasn't at all sure that the settings that worked for Steve would work for me.) My theory proved correct, but before I could make the appropriate adjustments to the pulpit, I noticed a small piece of yellowing paper taped to the pulpit. On that paper the following sentence was typed, "Please sir, we wish to see Jesus."

That comment gave me pause on two accounts: on one count I was mindful that I was not a "sir," and that these words were not particularly inviting to a young woman who was among many women in those days preparing for a vocation that was not particularly hospitable to my cohort.

On the other count, I wasn't convinced that anyone would see Jesus through my preaching. I was mostly just hoping to make it through the morning without throwing up. I had after all only accepted the position ten days earlier, and although I willingly accepted the church's offer to serve there, I didn't think that we had much in common.

(I wondered in that moment just what I had been thinking when I said "yes" to serving at this wealthy suburban parish. I didn't have the clothes for the job. I didn't share the same culture with the members. And I could barely get myself to the church without a map.)

In hindsight, I don't know whether the good people of Plymouth Church saw Jesus in or through anything that I ever said in that first sermon or in anything that I did in my subsequent three years of service. But I can say without a doubt that I saw Jesus through them. Some notable examples follow.

I saw Jesus through a man named Ted Gibson. Ted was a retired insurance salesman, who for many years served as the church treasurer and a kind of unofficial business manager. Ted never had any formal training in bookkeeping or accounting, so his recording methods were not what you'd call "generally accepted." But he was an honest person, and incredibly dedicated, and as long as Ted said that there was money in the bank to pay the bills, those with much stronger business skills were at peace with the operation.

Ted sweated the cash flow problems, always finding ways that the trustees could "borrow from Peter to pay Paul," while we waited for pledge payments to arrive that would cover the difference between income and expenses.

When the roof leaked, Ted was the guy who called the contractors. Ted met them at the door, and collected the bids. Ted got on the phone and polled the Trustees about which bid to accept, and Ted scheduled the winning bidder to do the prescribed work.

When the church sexton went on vacation, or the secretary called in sick, Ted dumped the trash and answered the phones. When the snow shovelers or the gardener were behind or we had an funeral in the middle of the week, Ted was the guy who arrived hours earlier to scrape ice off the sidewalks, sprinkle sand on the steps, and haul his own mower over to the church and make sure that the grounds looked nice for the service.

Ted did all these kinds of things and more, and he did them quietly, without being asked, and without any expectation of recognition. This was just who Ted was. He was a man through whom others gained a glimpse of Jesus.

I also saw Jesus through a woman named Betty Wrightson. When I first met Betty someone explained to me that she was the owner of an exclusive women's dress shop which catered to persons of wealth. She took clients' measurements, knew their color palette and style preferences, and privately selected, delivered, and outfitted her customers with new wardrobes season after season.

Over the three years that I served at Plymouth, I got to know Betty pretty well. She served on the Board of Trustees, and later was asked to be moderator (again). She couldn't actually remember how many times she had served as moderator. Shortly after Betty accepted the moderator's position, we learned that the pastor, who was my mentor, had accepted a call to another church. A few months later, the interim minister whom Plymouth hired resigned just a few weeks after accepting the position due to a complicated pregnancy.

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Betty and I had always gotten along well in my previous two years at the church, but let's just say that we "bonded" that third year while trying to hold together Plymouth Church through that interim year. The congregation eventually called and installed a wonderful pastor, Jonathan Morgan, who helped the congregation grow spiritually and numerically, so that today, Plymouth is a more vibrant and vital congregation. But that intervening year between senior pastors was difficult for Plymouth and for Betty.

I learned from working closely with Betty that year that there was a lot more going on in her life than most people realized. I saw how she shouldered not only the responsibility of a small business and the role of church moderator during a pastoral search, but also how she cared for her husband who suffered from a chronic illness, and how she took in and coached one of her daughters through a difficult divorce—all with tremendous strength and quiet grace. Through Betty, I saw the power and presence of the Easter Jesus.

A third person through whom I saw Jesus at Plymouth was Louise Bray. If Louise were in the congregation today, she would deny that anyone could see Jesus through her life and witness, because Louise had found Jesus to be an enigma. From an early age, she taught that she should worship him and be like him, but by her own admission she never felt completely comfortable with the identity of a "Christian."

Louise's squeamishness about a Christian identity, no doubt, would come as a surprise to some, because she had what you might call the perfect pedigree for being a Christian, and for being a person through whom others would see Jesus. Louise's father, Grady O'Day, (who had died several years before I met her) was an ordained United Methodist pastor, a noted theologian, and a distinguished professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School.

By the time I met Louise in the mid 1980s, she had been to more churches, heard more sermons, and studied more of the Bible than most seminarians, including me. At Plymouth, she was a frequent flier at worship. She and her husband, David, gave the lead gift for the church's new pipe organ that was installed during my second year at the church and seminary.

Louise and another woman in the congregation were the dynamic duo who underwrote and staffed many of the special functions that were held at The Women's Lunch Place (for homeless women), and which were hosted at Church of the Covenant in downtown Boston. And, she served multiple terms on the Teaching Parish Committee at Plymouth which oversaw successive generations of seminarians' learning experiences with the congregation.

Having known Louise now for 23 years, what I remember most about Louise is how she single-handedly nurtured more than two-dozen seminary women who passed through Plymouth Church on the way to ordination and our subsequent callings.

Louise invited us to tea and to lunch to hear about our callings and discernment processes. She challenged us with hard questions about faith and life, which tested and tempered our pastoral skills. She cracked open her best bottles of wine late at night and helped us debrief more than a few god-forsaken board meetings. As we approached the search and call process near the end of our senior years, she listened to our rants over the inequities in ministry opportunities related to our gender, our age, and/or our sexual orientation. She would also serve as a reference during our professional search processes. She threw us graduation and ordination parties when our calls to ministry came through. And, she was there at the other end of the phone for many of us, long after we had graduated seminary and left Plymouth Church, and listened and encouraged us through those times when personal or pastoral relationships were on the rocks. Through it all, Louise was for me, and for most of the women who served as field education students at Plymouth Church, the real presence of Christ in our midst.

In hind sight, I doubt that Ted, Betty, or Louise would ever claim to have seen Jesus, much less claim to be a person through whom others had seen Jesus. And yet, there they were—all three of them—embodying the resurrected Christ for others in the midst of their own respective *via crucis*—their own ways of the cross. Having remembered and claimed just a few of the saints whom I have known and loved who have revealed the living and loving God to me, I ask each of you to ponder the question, “Who have been these people for you? Through whom have you seen Jesus, in spite of temptations, trials, and travels to the cross? Through whom have you seen Jesus? What have you learned from them? How might God be calling you to be a person through whom others might see Jesus?”

Amen.