

“We Would Like To See Jesus”

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

There is a time-honored story (maybe you've heard it) about an old farmer who was persuaded by his nephew to visit the big city. Once convinced, the young man proudly took his uncle on a tour of the neighboring large metropolis.

At one point, as they walked down the street, the old man suddenly stopped and asked (his nephew), “Did you hear that?” The young man, looking around at all of the commotion, the traffic, the many pedestrians in a hurry, replied, “Hear what?” “A cricket,” the old man said, as he walked toward a little tuft of grass growing out of a tiny little crack in the side of a building. Sure enough, there tucked in the crack (in this big city), was a cricket.

The young man was amazed. “In all of this noise (he said), how did you pick up the sound of a cricket?” At that point, the old farmer reached into his pocket, pulled out a couple of coins, and dropped them on the sidewalk. Immediately, a number of passers-by began to reach for (their pockets) or look down to see if (what had dropped) was theirs. With that, the old man commented, “It's simple. We see what we're trained to see. We hear what we choose to hear.”

“We see what we're trained to see. We hear what we choose to hear.” You tell me. Is it possible that what happened in that big city (with that cricket and those few coins) can happen also in the Christian life? Is it possible that what happened between that old farmer and his young nephew can happen also to us?

Let's get right into it. Today's story sets in front of us some of the most important truths of the Christian faith. So important that if you grasp what's found in this story, you'll have a good grasp on what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Miss out on what's happening (fail to hear or to see) and you'll end up missing out on what life is meant to be.

Let's set the stage. Today's story is one (in John's gospel) that comes not long before Jesus is to go to the cross and offer his life for the sins of the world. It's placed just after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (on Palm Sunday) and just prior to his washing of the disciple's feet on Maundy Thursday.

It begins like this. (It says), “Now there were some Greeks who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee with a request. ‘Sir,’ (they said), ‘we would like to see Jesus.’ (John says), Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.” And that's when Jesus goes on to talk about what was soon to happen in his life, and what would need to happen in the lives of those seeking to be his disciples.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies (Jesus says), it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds... Whoever serves me (Jesus says) must follow me; and where I am, my servant will be also.”

“We see what we're trained to see. We hear what we choose to hear.” “Sir, we would like to see Jesus,” they said. “Philip (it says) went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.”

Not long ago, I came across an article titled “Why Some Churches Don't Grow.” In it, the authors, Roy Oswald and Martin Saarinen, present their findings, based upon research conducted among a number of Lutheran congregations.

Here I quote. (They said), “The Lutheran Church, like most mainline denominations, works under a broad unwritten assumption that the conversion to personal faith in Jesus Christ has already occurred when people decide to come to church. The task of the church is to simply assimilate those ‘already converted’ into the ongoing life of the congregation.”

They go on to say, “Lutheran clergy are well-trained in preaching the gospel, but not so well-trained in leading (those to whom they preach) to an active and living faith in Jesus Christ... What's needed to bridge the gap (and here's where it gets personal) is an authentic and self-giving life that's consistent with the message being preached” (end of quote.)

Now, I don't know if you agree with that assessment or not. (It's a bit harsh.) I'm not sure it's as simple as their research suggests, or whether what they suggest is as simple as they make it sound. Leading others to faith is not something we can fully control. It's a movement and work of the Spirit; our part is only our part.

What we can control (and this where their study leads) is what we do (with our part), in our own lives, and where it is we place Christ in the life that belongs to us. "I tell you the truth (Jesus says), unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

Now, when Jesus said that (in this text), he was talking about himself and what was soon to happen. (We'll get to that in a moment.) Unless he was willing to offer his own life on the cross, there would be no chance for you and I to have life. It would all depend on him.

He was also talking (when he said that) about us, about how life works, and about how (as followers of his) we need to be willing to do the same. (And therein lies the question.) Are you willing to die for Jesus? Are you willing to fall to the ground and give up your life that others might come to know him?

I don't know how many of you remember the name of Gracie Allen? (This is turning back the clock.) She died in the mid 1960's. Along with many other bit-parts, she was best known for her role as the scatterbrained wife in a comedy team with her husband, George Burns.

In one of their sketches, Gracie calls in a repairman to fix her electric clock. The repairman, after fiddling with it for a while, finally says, "Ma'am, there's nothing wrong with your clock. You didn't have it plugged in." To that, Gracie replies, "I know it's not plugged in (she said). I don't want to waste electricity. I only plug it in when I want to know what time it is."

As I read that article, the critique of the Lutheran church, and as I listen to the words of Jesus, of the need to fall to the earth and die, I can't help but wonder if there's a connection?

You can't keep your faith unplugged and expect it to work. You can't leave it on the shelf (unconnected to its power), pull it out when you want, and expect it to produce. We're either connected to Jesus or we're not. We're either plugged into the source (at all times), willing to give up our life for Christ, or unplugged from what it takes.

"Sir, we would like to see Jesus... Philip (it says) went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus."

Did you know that we're dying all the time? It's true. Every one of us is dying all the time. In fact, the truth is that if we're not dying, we're really dying. If we stop dying, then we start dying.

Scientists tell us that nearly 100,000 of our human body cells die every second. (Hard to believe!) We all just lost about a half million or so since I just mentioned this. Fortunately, in a healthy body, just as many cells are being reproduced at the same rate. Healthy bodies have this constant cycle of cells dying and being reproduced. In fact, some scientists say that we are completely regenerated every seven years, which can come as an enormous relief to many of us.

In the same way, they tell us that cells that fail to die off in the normal cycle are the ones that lead to problems. These are the cells that are related to the development of things like cancer and heart disease, and that become problematic because they get in the way (and block) the healthy development of the body.

Now, what's true in a person's physical body (and health) is also true in their emotional and spiritual health. (It's the same thing.) Our failure to let go and to let (some things die) leads to a host of spiritual problems.

The failure to forgive (for example) can lead to the death of a relationship. Anger and bitterness toward others can ravage the spirit like a cancer. Holding onto regrets or to past experiences can get in the way of a new life that wants so desperately to start. Being able to forgive and to let go and to die to one's self are the keys to opening and finding new life.

Jesus understood that; he understands that. If you want your life to produce, (and to produce things that last), then you need to be willing to die and to allow it to happen. If you're not willing to die (he says), you'll never die. And if you never die, there'll never be new life.

Maybe you saw the film with Richard Dreyfuss titled "Mr. Holland's Opus." It was a movie about the difficulties the man in the film experienced as he adapted to the life he had, rather than to the life he wanted. Mr. Holland's dream was to become a composer, but then along came a baby and (with that baby) came expenses. To pay the bills, he began teaching music, rather than composing music. Throughout the story, his teaching responsibilities continued to pull him further and further away from his dream.

In the end, the fruit he bore became clear in the finale. After many long years of touching young lives with his gifts, his “opus” was not the music marked on a sheet of a paper, but a brilliant symphony composed of the individual lives he had mentored and encouraged along the way.

It doesn’t happen overnight. It doesn’t happen without a cost. Every parent understands the need to die to self if (she or he) wants their child to succeed. Every child that ever succeeds understands that it doesn’t happen without putting in the time and energy to make it happen.

Again, it’s the same question. Are you willing to die so that others might live? Are you willing to live (in such a way) as a follower of Jesus that it might even cost you your life?

“Sir, we would like to see Jesus...Philip (it says) went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.” (Jesus said), “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

I don’t know if you’ve noticed it (or not), but that’s not what the world today wants to hear. Our world today prefers a message that is inoffensively neutral. To talk about the necessity of dying to one’s self and following a man who died on a cross is no less attractive today than it was then. (Let’s not pretend that it is.) But you can’t have it both ways. Either Jesus was right or he wasn’t. Either dying to one’s self brings life or it doesn’t. Either the cross was God’s answer for sin or it was sin’s answer for God.

Dorothy Sayers was an English play write and poet, a Christian author. In one of her essays about the American culture, she pulls no punches. She says, “In our world today (trying to fit in) we call it tolerance, but in hell (she says) it’s called despair...the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it is willing to die.” (That’s quite the critique.)

H. Richard Niebuhr, one of the most influential Christian ethicists of the 20th century is even more direct. He says, “A cross-less Christianity is a gospel that is no gospel at all.” It is “a false gospel” (he says) in which “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” There is no Christ without a cross. There is no way to follow except to follow.

“Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” (We want to know this one called the Christ.) “Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.”

Next week, we move into what is (without question) the most life-changing week in the history of our world. Beginning with Palm Sunday, and then continuing through (the remembrances of) Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, (culminating in Easter), those next seven days define what life on this earth is all about.

Nothing else in this world does what that final week of Jesus’ life does. All of life’s big questions are answered. All of life’s search for purpose and meaning are found; but not without a cross and not without a willingness to die.

And so, you tell me. Do you want to see Jesus? Do you want to know, (to finally know), what it means to live? Then come and eat, come and drink; die to yourself, fall to the ground, give it all up, let it go, and give it all to him. If you’re not willing to die, you’ll never die. And if you never die, there’ll never be new life.

Let’s pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your willingness to allow your Son to die so that we might live. We thank you for his cross and for the calling we have in him to follow. Help us to die to ourselves, to be willing to give our lives to Christ, that in so dying and giving we might live. In his name we pray. Amen.