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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2021
Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

In Jesus's day pilgrims would have come to Jerusalem from all across the Roman world to celebrate the feast of Passover. I image it as a busy, bustling time in the city, full of excitement and energy. Kind of like Times Square on New Year's Eve. Scholars tell us that the city of Jerusalem was normally about 20-30,000 people but at Passover it would have swelled to about 150,000.

Jesus was among those who traveled to Jerusalem for Passover and his reputation preceded him. John tells us that the religious leaders of the day were afraid of Jesus, they were afraid of his challenges to the oppressive practices of the Roman Empire. They were worried about his challenges to their complicity with Rome. In chapter 11 we hear them say, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." Jesus was stirring things up. His vision of the covenant between God and the people that we heard about from the prophet Jeremiah this morning, was threatening to their way of life.

So, it's not surprising that people are curious about him. John tells us that a group of Greek visitors to Jerusalem comes to Philip and says, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." We don't know if these were gentile converts or if they were Jews from outlying regions, but whoever they were, they had heard about Jesus and they wanted to see for themselves who he was.

These folks may have heard that Jesus just brought Lazarus back from death to life. They may have heard how he turned water into fine wine, how he healed the sick, and how he miraculously fed thousands with just a few loaves and fishes. I wonder if this is the Jesus they

were expecting to see – the Jesus of miracles and cures and resurrection. What they heard must have been a surprise. They heard a discourse on death.

I wonder if we also want to see the Jesus of miracles and cures and resurrection and we are surprised by the Jesus who talks about death. There is the old joke that the only two constants in life are taxes and death. That may be true, but Jesus isn't just talking about our bodily death here. He is talking about death to ways that are in opposition to God's purposes – to the covenant that God has made with humanity. When Jesus talks about "the world" here is not referring to God's creation. He is talking about the forces that are opposed to God.

Those forces are present in our world today. In the past few months, they have reared their head at Sewanee, where I went to seminary. Sewanee, officially named The University of the South, is an idyllic mountaintop retreat, set apart from the surrounding communities. It is also a place that was founded by slaveholders to educate only white students and to prove that a slaveholding society could be a cultured society. And now for the first time, the University has an African American Vice Chancellor and president. Vice Chancellor Brigety is helping the university continue to reckon with its Confederate past, an effort that started a few years back. Since they moved into their campus home last year, the Brigety family has been the target of repeated vandalism and threatening messages left at their home in the dark of the night. Vice Chancellor Brigety kept the attacks quiet at first, but as they continued he knew he had to speak out and to challenge the community to oppose the forces that would diminish his family or anyone whose skin is not white. He said to the students and faculty, "It is up to us to decide who we are, what we will tolerate and how we will live together." Jesus might have said, if you want to see me, to follow me, you have to be willing to die to these forces. You can't look away. It's

up to you, as my followers, to expose the forces that are not of God, so that all may reject them and choose life.

Jesus is speaking hard words in today's Gospel. He is telling any of us who want to follow him that it won't be an easy path. It will mean a life of compassion, of suffering with our brothers and sisters. When we look at Jesus, when we look with Jesus, we can only look with empathy and compassion. We see in Jesus that any sense of being separate from one another is an illusion.

But the forces that oppose God are strong. Look at the recent rise in Asian American hate crimes in our country. Fox news reported this week that there have been over 3.800 hate related incidents targeting Asian Americans this past year.¹ USA Today reports that incidents of white supremacist propaganda hit an all-time high in 2020.² As followers of Jesus, who went to the cross to expose and defeat sin, we cannot look away.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by these statistics and throw our hands up. It's tempting to say, "What can I do about it? I am just one person." We don't all have to do big things, start initiatives, or found non-profit organizations. We simply have to live our lives as if we see Jesus for all that he is. Not just the miracle worker, but the one who leads us to die to anything that is opposed to God.

We can be the loving neighbor who goes out of our way to notice when someone is hurting, whether we like or agree with them or not. We can watch our talk at the kitchen table, the stories we tell, the jokes we laugh at, the language we use to describe one another. We can start to be aware of our tendency to lump whole groups of people together and paint them with

¹ <https://www.foxnews.com/us/nearly-3800-incidents-racism-asian-american-past-year-study>

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/03/17/white-supremacist-propaganda-hits-all-time-high/4721323001/>

one brush, which really robs them of their humanity. We can make an effort to look at others who are different from us with compassion rather than judgement. We can pray for prejudice and fear of other people to die within us and give way to new life.

And in that God is glorified. God's ways of love and compassion and empathy are glorified as the way to new life. God is not glorified in the suffering, not in the death itself but in the living out of the covenant of love for all creation. God's glory is creation as God intended it. Standing together, lifting one another up, considering one another and not just ourselves, living as a community where all people matter and there is no one who is "the other." That is God's glory.

As we approach Holy Week, may we have the courage to be people of compassion. May we have the courage to suffer alongside our brothers and sisters and to expose the ways of the world that are in opposition to God. May we be willing to let die anything that keeps us from seeing Jesus and following in his footsteps, that we may bear the fruit of love and compassion in our troubled world.