

WITH JESUS
John 12:20-33
March 29, 2009
First Mennonite Church
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Jesus' public ministry is drawing to a close. The clock is ticking. He has arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover. In less than a week, Jesus will be put to death on the cross, the hideous and humiliating form of execution employed by the occupying Roman government to make a public display of traitors and dangerous criminals. As John's Gospel puts it, his "hour" has come; he will soon "be lifted up" and "glorified."

When Jesus says that he will "be lifted up from the earth" (12:32), a double meaning is suggested. Jesus will be lifted up to hang on the cross and he will also be lifted, or taken, up into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. The path to his glorification runs straight through the cross and the grave. Jesus' glory does not depend upon the glory of the world; rather his glory is "the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father" (1:14).

Let's examine this passage through the lens of our Lenten theme of integrity, asking: How do Jesus' words and actions reflect integrity? When we gaze upon the cross, do we see a symbol of love and integrity? Are we prepared to follow Jesus to the cross, as an act of discipleship with integrity?

The cross has been lurking in the background during these weeks of Lent. We've glimpsed its two-dimensional form emerging from the children's story board and its rough three-dimensional form sideways to the sanctuary wall. Now we see the cross clearly, standing upright. Upright is, of course, the functional posture of the cross. And upright is one of the terms we have been using to talk about integrity!¹

The signs Jesus has performed in the course of his ministry have caused his reputation to grow. His demonstrated spiritual power and popularity have now reached the point of threatening the powers that be. What began with the innocent miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana has evolved through several marvelous healings and the remarkable feeding of the 5,000, and culminated in John 11 with the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In reviving Lazarus after he has been in the tomb for four days, Jesus demonstrates the "glory of God" before a crowd of witnesses (11:40-44). The spectacular news about Lazarus spreads quickly, attracting new crowds and heightening the jealousy and ire of the religious authorities, who begin plotting to kill Jesus.

Today's text opens with some Greeks approaching the disciples, asking to see Jesus (12:20), presumably in order to speak with him and become disciples themselves. Their request signals that Jesus' reputation has reached new heights. Indeed, these Gentile pilgrims prove the Pharisees correct in their assessment that "the world has gone after

¹See sermon entitled "Upright," preached on March 1, 2009.

him!" (12:19). Further, they validate the parameters of the mission Jesus has been given by the Father, namely to "draw all people" to him (12: 32).

But neither the religious authorities nor the crowds of people really understand the values Jesus is espousing. Jesus rejects the allure of political power, of amassing wealth, and of employing military might. Instead, he models obedience to God and loving, non-violent servanthood. He teaches, in parables and stories, in memorable sayings, and by example, the counter-cultural values of the kingdom of God. At this point in the Gospel narrative, the most important lesson Jesus will teach looms in front of him, namely the daunting lesson of the cross.

One way to interpret the cross is as a faithful expression of kingdom of God values. New Testament scholar Mary Schertz writes: "Jesus had to die because the kingdom he proclaimed was not a realm founded upon or maintained by violence. The death of Jesus, then, was inevitable only because it constituted an act of integrity within the framework of his commitment to the reign of God."² *An act of integrity*, says Schertz. He walked the talk as the Prince of Peace, we might say.

In *The God of the Gospel of John*, Marianne Meye Thompson emphasizes another aspect of Jesus' fidelity to the reign of God, namely his relationship with the Father. Jesus lays down his life freely, in obedience to the Father, whose charge he wants to keep (10:18) and which he seeks to do.³ This is the integrity of honoring commitment and trusting in God. Jesus is honest about his emotions, but looks beyond them: "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (John 12:27).

Jesus' integrity is also manifest in choosing the cross out of love for humankind. His actions demonstrate the victory of love over the fear of death and suffering. He models for us a faith-filled view of human mortality, pointing us toward, and promising, the gift of eternal life, as God has commanded (12:50). Eternal life is presented as unending fellowship with God, a fellowship that includes Jesus: "where I am, there will my servant be also" (12:26).

Jesus' is forthright about death being part of a natural cycle that spawns abundant life. The image he uses is that of a single grain of wheat, falling into the earth and dying, and later sprouting to produce much fruit (12:24). Like the Pacific salmon that swim upstream to their spawning beds, lay their eggs, and then die, there is both inevitable decay and new birth. In the wheat image, there is also the noteworthy movement from one to many—from a single grain to much fruit, underscoring the community and fellowship of kingdom living. The complementary movement of expansion is on the axis of time—from this finite, earthy life to eternity.

² Mary H. Schertz, "God's Cross and Women's Questions: A Biblical Perspective on the Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (1994), 197.

³ Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 95.

In these several ways, Jesus' integrity subverts the socially shameful death of crucifixion. Instead of reading the cross as a triumph for the forces of darkness, we are able to read the cross as giving notice to the ruler of the world that the hold of evil has been broken and the in-breaking of the kingdom has begun (12:31).

Jesus also outlines a role and expectation for his disciples (verse 26): "Whoever serves me must follow me." Following Jesus is the act of integrity that represents Christian mission in this life, including the potential for suffering. Canadian Mennonite theological Harry Huebner encourages us to claim the strength of moral character that Jesus displayed: "The suffering servant God of Jesus Christ—the one who comes to us in forgiveness and compassion; the one who is willing to accept defeat at the cross instead of loss of character."⁴ The pure in heart will see God, says Jesus (Matthew 5:8). Who are the pure in heart? According to Stephen Carter, the pure in heart are those who have undivided hearts and obey God's commandments. They are people of integrity.⁵

The wearing of a cross, taken rather casually as adornment in our society, is actually a call to rigorous discipleship. William Frazier comments on the cross as symbol to be carried into the mission field: "Those who receive it possess not only a symbol of their mission but a handbook on how to carry it out."⁶ Just as Jesus faced violent opposition that resulted in his death, so as Mary Schertz puts it, "Disciples who follow Jesus in proclaiming and enacting this kingdom will surely get themselves into serious jeopardy."⁷ In John 21:15-19, Jesus points Peter toward this way of shepherding the sheep. When Jesus foretells Peter's death, we hear echoes of John 10:11: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

As a present-day example, let us recall the 2006 death in Iraq of Christian Peacemaker Team member and Quaker Tom Fox, who was taken hostage and later executed by his captors. Tom Fox clearly saw his CPT witness in Iraq as being faithful to the life and death of Jesus. An electronic message distributed by The Fellowship of Reconciliation at the time of his death quoted Tom's blog: "The only something in my life I can hold onto is to do what little I can to bring about the creation of the Peaceable Realm of God."⁸

The kingdom of God, as Tom Fox recognized, is about shalom. In order for human efforts on behalf of the kingdom of God to have integrity, they must be congruent with the way of being and action that Jesus modeled—the way of shalom. Because shalom concerns the whole created order, it would be a distortion of Jesus' ministry to equate the cross only with individual salvation. John de Gruchy cautions against "spiritualizing both the 'kingdom of heaven' and God's 'righteousness,'" such that the "the biblical

⁴Harry Huebner, "Christian Pacifism and the Character of God," in *The Church as Theological Community*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1990), 267.

⁵Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), 8.

⁶Quoted by David J. Bosch in his *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 122.

⁷Schertz, 206.

⁸Email message, "Grieving Tom Fox, Peacemaker," Fellowship of Reconciliation, March 14, 2006.

concern for the transformation of the world is reduced to the salvation of the individual.”⁹ This is one of the problems that inhabit our traditional atonement discourse. Another is the need to distinguish between suffering in the name of Jesus on behalf of justice and the suffering that is intertwined with victimization and injustice.¹⁰ These matters deserve their own future sermons.

Keeping the collective vision of shalom justice before us helps ensure that we do not truncate the biblical message of Jesus’ death. All faithful responses to the death of Jesus anticipate an opening to reconciliation and a foretaste of the peaceable kingdom.

Two concluding points:

First, Erik Erikson, who pioneered psychological work with the human life cycle, proposed eight sets of challenges that adults encounter as they mature. The final, eighth stage, he called *integrity versus despair*.¹¹ In the shadow of the cross, Jesus chose integrity over despair. In the shadow of death, in the midst of suffering, may we likewise choose integrity over despair.

Second, we need to *see* the cross, not shrink from it, or try to sanitize it. At some deep level, after we have given all the possible theological explanations, we need simply to sit and see, see and feel the emotional weight of Jesus loving, accepting, suffering, and dying. Many of you will remember the story Jill Schreiber told last summer of her pre-school Sunday School class, who protested when they saw a picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, suffering alone. Why didn’t his friends climb up there with him and comfort him, they asked Jill? A question from the heart, echoing the compassion and love that brought Jesus to that painful place of being lifted up.¹²

May we choose to be with Jesus, now and always, not only on the mountaintop, but also carrying the cross, accepting our mortality, and anticipating the day when we will worship with the Lamb before the throne of God.

With Jesus. With integrity. May it be so.

Prayer of confession:

Precious Lord Jesus,
You taught us that serving means following you,
That where you are, there will your servants be also.

We confess that the glory of the world tempts us.
Focus our sights instead on the greater glory that comes from God,

⁹John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 61.

¹⁰Schertz, 207.

¹¹See James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 14-22.

¹²See William H. Willimon, “Drawing All to Himself,” *Christian Century*, March 24, 1982, 326-27.

The glory you revealed in the victory of love over power.

Seeing may we believe:

Much fruit comes from the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies.

Believing may we see:

God's commandment is eternal life.

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