

Prayer of Preparation: The soil of our hearts and minds has been prepared by the reading of your word, Lord. Guide now our reflection that we might sense your call upon our lives in response to this word. In Christ's name. Amen.

A Troubled Soul

John 12:20-33

March 29, 2009

Are you ready for spring and summer? Boy, I am. I can't wait for warmer weather and our mission trip to the Crow Creek Reservation and our family vacation to the beach. I'm ready to be a tourist for awhile. Now, everything about being a tourist is not wonderful. Milton Klamen has compiled a list of what he calls "Vacation Vexations" (or, Words We Wish We'd Never Heard). Listen to some of them and see if you don't agree:

"Sure we'll take the dog along. How much trouble can it be?"

"The heck with reservations! We're sure to find a place."

"I know we have only a quarter tank of gas, but there's bound to be one or two stations along this shortcut."

"The suntan lotion is up in our room; another half hour won't hurt."

"Aw, c'mon! A little French place like this couldn't be too expensive!"

"We'll get that flat fixed where we stop for the night. I never heard of two tires going bad in one day."¹

Some Greeks were vacationing in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival. It wasn't their first time. Now, it wasn't that they had converted to Judaism. No, it was that they were just being who they were – curious about different religions & different ideas. They had heard about a new local religious celebrity by the name of Jesus and decided to check him out – his ideas and all.

So, they approached the disciple Philip – probably because his name was Greek sounding and they thought that might make him more willing to help them.² Now, their request had to have been a problem for Philip because he knew that up until that time Jesus' ministry had been pretty much exclusively among the Jewish community. But he knew Jesus never considered anyone a nuisance and so he told Andrew and the two of them went to Jesus and told him of the request of the Greek travelers.

What they didn't know was that the fact these Greeks wanted to see Jesus would be so significant to Jesus. Nothing is mentioned about Jesus going to meet the visitors. For all we know, they were left standing on some street corner in Jerusalem. What we do know is apparently Jesus understood their inquiry as some sort of sign that his time had come. He put it this way: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

The fact that the Greeks were inquiring about him signaled to Jesus that it was time for the audience to whom the message God had given him to be expanded – that the kingdom he was ushering in was available to everyone in the world, not just the Jewish people. Now, this probably wasn't something that just came to him at that moment. God had probably let him in on it long before. It was just that the inquiry of the Greeks was a sign that the time was ripe.

But, radical as that element of this new religious movement was in Jesus' day – that it was for everyone: Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, red and yellow, black and white – that no race, economic group, social class, sex, denomination or age group was to be excluded – that Jesus is Lord of us all – radical as that idea was, it wasn't the only thing in the text we need to understand as part of our DNA as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus made reference to the “Son of Man” in his speech, we can be sure everyone really started to pay attention. We don't have time to deal with everything that phrase generated in the people of that day – the kind of positive emotion the mere mention of the title “Son of Man” would cause – but, suffice it to say, that the phrase awakened in them feelings of patriotism, nationalism, religious fervor, excitement, anticipation, a sense of being comforted. Soon, they would be in control – soon, there would be an end to their strife, their lack of power, their fear, etc.

Well, what Jesus said next didn't quite fit the images flooding their minds and hearts when they first heard him say the phrase “Son of Man”. Jesus began talking about farming – about how a grain of wheat must first die in the earth before it can bear fruit. Then he talked about loving and losing lives – about hating and keeping them. Even though we're not told anyone said anything out loud, someone surely had to have been saying under their breath or in their head: “What are you talking about Jesus?” “Are you serious, Jesus?” “Following you is about dying and suffering and losing our lives and hating our lives?”

Jesus didn't stop there. Seemingly trying to make his case for the kind of living that was going to cause this depressing style of living, he added: “If any one serves me, they must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, God will honor them.” “If you want to be my disciple, one of my followers, then you are going to have to live lives like I'm living and going to live.” The kind of life God is calling us to live involves serving – becoming weak for the weak, poor for the poor, an outcast for those on the outside of society, taking up unpopular causes. You see, brothers and sisters in Christ, this text is about discipleship – it's a call to discipleship.

The people were on fire about him – they had already screamed their “hosannas” and waved their palm branches as he entered Jerusalem. Rather than taking up the mantle they wanted him to though, Jesus decided it was time to lay out the whole story so they could decide if they still wanted a piece of the action following him was going to involve. Oh, there's going to be victory alright, but not without suffering, blood, sweat and tears. Those who were listening had to have been bewildered – amazed - troubled. They had been dreaming about swords and triumphant marches, white horses and the spoils of victory, not a donkey and being ridiculed - certainly not a cross.

Sooner or later on the journey of faith each of us has to come to terms with the cross in our lives. We have to face that we can't forever sit at the feet of Jesus and simply listen to his words or marvel at the unique way he touches the needs of others and anxiously wait for him to do something spectacular in our lives. There has to come a time when we have to accept that it's not about miracles and meditation, but about dying to self – dying to being comfortable – dying to being secure – dying to the proper life – dying to our ambitions and aims – dying to the schedules we've become slaves to - dying to our lack of self esteem – dying to our need to be popular – dying to our self doubts – dying to not wanting to feel uncomfortable – dying to our excuse-making - so that Christ might live in us and through us.

What Jesus said next I think is very interesting and is what prompted the title of this morning's sermon. It's one of the infrequent times we hear Jesus lament his situation. “I've just shared with you what I foresee is going to

happen to me if I continue down this path and to all of you who sign on. And, I've got to tell you, I'm hurting. 'My soul is troubled.'" "Do you think I should ask God to rescue me – to let this not be my future – to let there be another way for the ushering in of the new way of understanding this faith journey?"

Even Jesus, you see, battled with the choice he had to make. He no more wanted to die for the cause than any one of us. One bible scholar put it this way: "No one wishes to die; no one wishes to die at thirty-three; and no one wishes to die upon a cross. There would have been no virtue in Jesus' obedience to God at all, if it had come easily and without cost. Real courage does not mean not being afraid. There is no virtue in doing a thing if to do it is an easy thing. Real courage means to be terribly afraid, and yet to do the thing that ought to be done."³

Jesus was aware of what he faced. He knew to do what was necessary was going to end in his death – a death to self at least, but also death in a physical sense. And then he answered his own questioning with: "But it was for this reason that I came to this hour." "Despite the tension in my soul – despite how troubled I am in my soul – despite the difficulties that lay ahead – I must go on."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, choosing to follow Jesus may, probably will, create for us opportunities that will demand more than we want it to. It will involve us being uncomfortable. It will cause our souls to be troubled – to want to do something else – to hope that someone else will come through. I would suggest to you this morning that in fact it might be when our souls are most troubled by something that we can begin to know what it is God would have us do or be. The basic premise behind Elizabeth O'Connor's book Cry Pain, Cry Hope is that it is precisely at the point of our greatest pains or concerns that we may find our voices – our passion – for responding to God's call on our lives. It's when our souls are troubled that we are most able to be used by God.

Dorothea Dix was a New England school teacher. She retired as a result of some health concerns. She was visiting with a seminary student one day when he asked her if she would consider helping him with a task for which he felt inadequate.

His task was to visit women prisoners. Dorothea agreed to help him. She was shocked with what she discovered in the jails. She saw murderers and the mentally ill and those charged with misdemeanors all living right alongside each other. She dedicated her life to helping these women. Despite how poor her health was and how weak her body was she labored with others for over forty years to change things. She gave of herself in unbelievable ways. She helped to establish thirty mental hospitals before she died. Those the rest of society looked down upon she gave her life to do something for.⁴

In St. Patrick's Cathedral in London there is a memorial to General Charles Gordon. The epitaph on his memorial reads: "He gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, his heart to God." I think that's a pretty impressive epitaph. I don't think I'd be terribly prophetic if I observed that there's probably not a one of us here this morning who doesn't want our life to count for something. That is, we want to make a difference in this world. We want to be remembered by those who love us. We want to make a contribution to our community and world. We don't want to live mediocre lives.

Many of us have read a book or two by Philip Yancey. He was a journalist before he wrote books. He interviewed persons of all walks in life. Once he looked back on all the people he had written about and he divided them into two groups: stars and servants. He put in the star category NFL greats, actors, musicians, famous authors, TV personalities - people who take up the pages in our magazines, newspapers and television

programming. He reflected on how we fawn over them and pay attention to the minutiae of their lives – “the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the aerobic routines they follow, the people they love, the toothpaste they use.”⁵

Yancey further observed that they were for the most part a miserable group of people. “Most have troubled or broken marriages. Nearly all are hopelessly dependent on psychotherapy. In a heavy irony, these larger-than-life heroes seem tormented by incurable self-doubt.”⁶

He placed in the servant category: “People like Dr. Paul Brand, who worked for twenty years among the poorest of the poor, leprosy patients in rural India - health workers who left high paying jobs to serve with Mendenhall Ministries in a backwater town of Mississippi - relief workers in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, or other such repositories of world-class human suffering - the Ph.D.’s scattered throughout jungles of South America translating the Bible into obscure languages.”⁷

Yancey said that he was prepared to honor and admire these servants but he wasn’t prepared to envy them, which is precisely what happened to him though. He noted that when he laid the two groups side by side – stars and servants – well, the servants emerged as his favorites. He observed: “They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, ‘wasting’ their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated. But somehow in the process of losing their lives they have found them. They have received the peace that is not of this world.”⁸

“The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” Jesus said, and that means that those who follow him had better be ready to die to self and be ready to serve. It will probably include some times of our souls – our spirits – our minds – our hearts - being troubled. Hear the good news: where you experience pain in life is where you will find your hope – is where you will find God.

Let us pray.

1. King Duncan, “A Life Above All Others,” Collected Sermons (DynamicPreaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
2. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John, Volume 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 140.
3. Ibid., p. 146.
4. William K. Quick, Signs of Our Times (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 104-105.
5. Philip Yancey, Where Is God When It Hurts? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.