

Fifth Weekend in Lent (RCL/B)
Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33
March 20-21, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I had an interesting conversation this past week with a friend whose vocation is counseling. She's very spiritual but not religiously active, in terms of worship or current membership in a faith family. Yet she spoke with some passion about how important it is for **all** religious communities to loosen up, lighten up rules and requirements, whether they're churches, synagogues, mosques, Buddhist or Hindu temples, whatever. Her reason is that people are **hungry** for connection with the divine and they **long** for human community, too. They need a safe, welcoming place to serve as their spiritual nest.

Jesus wants that for us all, too. What He says in today's Gospel is so powerful!

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32)

The word for "lifted up" is the same as "crucify." So Jesus isn't talking about being lifted up in His resurrection or His ascension, but in His crucifixion. It is **on** the cross that He stretches out His arms and says, "I love you this much," and **from** the cross that He reaches out to embrace and save.

The Greeks in today's Gospel tell Philip, *"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."* (John 12:21)

There are a lot of people, still, who want to see Jesus. Often, they don't even realize He's the One they're looking for. All they know is that they're searching for meaning in their life, maybe struggling to forgive somebody else or themselves, perhaps coming up empty overall and thinking, "There's gotta be more than this...." There's a huge void and it just so happens to be God-shaped. The God-shaped void is where God (or more like their conscious connection to God) is missing.

So Jesus wants to draw everyone to Himself. And we've gotta be so very careful that when **He** draws or attracts people, **we** don't repel them! None of us would do it consciously, but we've all been guilty of being clueless at points. Here are a couple examples: visitors with a little one are sitting near us in the pew. The child gets antsy or is talking pretty loud and we think we're being helpful by tapping the parent on the shoulder and saying, "We have a nursery downstairs." The unhelpful message the parent hears is, "Children are not really welcomed in worship here," and from the pastor's perspective, at least, nothing could be further than the truth! Another example: an acquaintance from the community whom we happen to know belongs to another church appears in worship and we ask, "What are **you** doing here??" The unintended message the visitor hears is, "You don't belong here." One of my favorites in an awful sort of way is visitors telling me, after the fact, that the first time they came to worship someone said, "Excuse me, you're sitting in my pew," and waited for them to move.

Of course there are many other sad tales that I **don't** know about people being divinely attracted to us and then feeling humanly repelled, stories I've never heard because they never came back again. Sometimes I hear similar stories because people have felt rejected elsewhere, fled and then come to us. "I went for weeks and nobody ever said hello," is one frequent explanation I hear.

Sometimes it's what they hear from the pulpit that drives people away from one congregation to look for another faith family with values more similar to their own. Ironically, sometimes the offending message has to do with **condemning** certain groups of people, and sometimes it has to do with **embracing** certain groups of people. There was an interesting letter to the editor that I read this week, written by a rabbi. She wrote, "A clergy

person does not preach a sermon to generate thumbs-up emojis; she speaks to move her congregation to pursue justice.” That holds for both Jews and Christians, for we all look to the standard God provides in Micah 6:8:

“And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with your God?”

“Welcoming” and “inclusive” are two words that frequently come up to describe our Holy Trinity community. I’d say, by and large, we **are** welcoming and inclusive. But part of being disciples of Jesus is acknowledging that we haven’t arrived yet and there’s always room for improvement. By God’s grace it’s possible for us to become more and more “the beloved community” our Lord Jesus envisioned and our God intends. So that means there’s always some “dying to self” that needs to be going on.

In today’s Gospel Jesus says:

“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, the Father will honor.” (John 12:24-26)

I love reading this passage at graveside, comforting the family with the hope of the resurrection that follows death, because of our Lord Jesus’ death for us. But I also have to admit that our Lord was talking about the dying to self that goes on **while we still live**. Dying to self doesn’t **feel** good, but it **does** good. Dying to self is the uncomfortable realization of my prejudices against people of certain color, nationalities, religions, political persuasions, sexual orientations. Dying to self means allowing the Holy Spirit to take away my preconceived, self-righteous notions of who is welcomed around here and who is not. Dying to self is the admission that I am not right about everything, and that sometimes I am so “right”, I’m wrong.

We **need** God's grace in order to **ask** God's grace to die to self, because if we're honest with ourselves, most of us are pretty set in our ways and fairly adamant about our beliefs. I'm not going to totally "out" myself here, but one of the issues I stood firm on for **years** was not scheduling Sunday School on top of the worship hour. "Families belong together in worship!" I insisted. Well, yes, they do, but because I was so stubborn for so long, many families didn't worship at all, and some of them didn't send the kids to Sunday School, either. The Holy Spirit wore me down over the course of years and many conversations. I finally saw I was throwing out the baby with the bath water, and agreed that Sun. School could overlap worship. We're still working on fine-tuning the timing of Sun. School and worship, but I'm now more open to "incoming" wisdom from parents and teachers. It took a tiny "dying of self" for me to change my mind, because I was so doggone sure I was right (about so many things ☺).

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." In our Life Together in this community of faith, may our spoken **and** silent messages proclaim "Welcome!" to those whom the Spirit draws. May we remember that Jesus died for whoever shows up at our doors. Holy Spirit, remind us that people wish to see Jesus, that they are **hungry** for connection with the divine and they **long** for human community, too. Those whom the Spirit attracts may we never repel. Grant us grace to die to self in whatever ways are necessary to extend the welcome we ourselves have received.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham