

17 March 2024, 5 Lent B
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33
Psalm 51:1-13

Selfless Love

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. **Amen.**

As we approach Holy Week, Jesus' teachings take on a more urgent, more extreme tone. Jesus is running out of time. He knows that the resurrection lies on the other side, but also he knows that, before getting there, he and his friends are going to have to go through some stuff, unimaginable stuff. He's got to make sure everyone is prepared – or as prepared as they can be.

Today's Gospel lesson takes place around the time of Passover. People from all over, including Jesus and his followers, are coming to Jerusalem for the festival. Before this, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus stops in Bethany to visit his friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. This is when, as John's Gospel tells

it, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume, which upsets folks. (John's Gospel singles out Judas.) The authorities decide to put Jesus and Lazarus to death because Lazarus's resurrection has caught folks' attention and led them to follow Jesus.

Then, Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly to shouts of "Hosanna!" – "Save!" This is the event we will commemorate next Sunday as Palm Sunday. The crowd seems all in on this Jesus. He can raise the dead! The crowd is so taken with Jesus, that the Pharisees remark, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" Jesus is quite the celebrity.

Today's Gospel lesson comes right after that. People from all over are in town and this includes some Greeks. These Greeks may have been Hellenistic Jews or maybe they were Gentiles. Perhaps they heard about Jesus just in these last few days. Perhaps they heard murmurings about him before setting out for Jerusalem. Whoever they are and however they've come to know about Jesus, they want to see what this fellow is all about. They want to see for themselves what the big deal is.

They take an oddly circuitous route to contact Jesus. These inquirers go first to Philip, then Philip goes to Andrew, and then Philip and Andrew tell Jesus. Why? These inquirers seem to know that Jesus is an important person, and

so they follow a sort of protocol to request an audience. This odd game of telephone appears meant to emphasize that Jesus is, indeed, a big deal: even outsiders know they can't just go up to him.

That's not the only bizarre thing that happens in this reading. Philip and Andrew tell Jesus: "Hey, Jesus. We have some folks here who are interested in seeing you." And Jesus goes on a rant that bears no relationship to the question at hand. In fact, John's Gospel never tells us if our inquirer friends ever got to see Jesus. Though, this scene continues for a few more verse and concludes with Jesus leaving and hiding from the crowds. I fear our Greek inquirers never got a face-to-face with Jesus.

In John's Gospel, whether this meeting ever took place is not important. What is important is what Jesus says. So, what is Jesus on about? Why does a simple request to see him prompt a long, energetic rant about glorification, grains of wheat, loving one's life, judgment, and crucifixion?

Some commentators speculate that these Greeks have come to see Jesus to learn what he is all about, what his message is. So, in response, Jesus tells them just that. Jesus offers a summary of his teachings and purpose. That sort of makes sense to me, so let's go with that. Now, instead of an off-

topic rant, Jesus's response is along the lines of, "They want to know what my message is? Tell them this."

Jesus' words prefigure his death. The grain of wheat must in some sense die to what it is before it can be something greater. The harder you try to hold on to your life, the more readily it slips away. To become great, you must become a servant. Jesus, hanging and dying on a cross, will draw all people to himself. This message is not just about Jesus' death, though. These are teachings Jesus offers to those around him – and to us. Even more immediately, these words are supposed to help his followers through the pain that lies ahead. What are we supposed to make of these enigmatic sayings? At the center of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection is radical selfless love.

The book *Belovedness: Finding God and Self on Campus* offers fodder for discernment directed at college students as they consider the big questions in life. In my view, this book is worthwhile for all of us. In the Introduction to this collection of essays, the editors James Franklin and Becky Zartman discuss the good and bad the Church has done in history. The former they call "life-giving work," and the latter they call "toxic." They write this:

What the life-giving work has in common is love that knows no bounds. What the toxic colonialism and violence has in common is the inability to see that God created and loves all people. Here's the takeaway: how we understand God's love for ourselves and others matters. A lot.

The thrust of the book *Belovedness* is just that: recognizing that each of us is profoundly, unshakably, indescribably beloved by our Creator. Our Gospel lesson today, though, speaks to another truth the editors of *Belovedness* discuss: "Part of recognizing your own belovedness is recognizing the belovedness of others."

Jesus' arrest, rigged trial, torture, and crucifixion offer an extreme example of radical selfless love. It is a witness that our God, who needs nothing – including us – and who doesn't have to do anything, loves us so much that God would give the Divine Being into our care, even suffering unimaginable cruelty and violence at our hands, and yet, continue to love us. God has loved us in the beginning from the moment the Divine Image was sculpted into our being and from the moment the Divine Breath entered our lungs – and God never stopped and never will. But more on that next week.

Jesus tells us to do likewise. No, Jesus does not require that each of us suffer a literal death to prove our love for one another. But Jesus does require that our selfishness die to enable us to live fully into the truth that God loves each of us. Yes, I am beloved. You are beloved. And so is everyone else.

We often function from a self-centered perspective. We lie to others to cover our mistakes. We put our own needs ahead of the needs of others. We work toward what we want without thinking much at all about the impact on others. We choose ourselves even at the expense of others whom God loves. If you've ever driven anywhere in the Boston area, you've experienced countless examples of people driving as if they are the only person on the road who matters – perhaps, you've even been that person. Yeah, me too.

But we are called to remember that we are all beloved. That includes everyone around us. And we need to conduct ourselves so as to reinforce, not undermine, that belovedness. We must die to our selfishness, our self-centeredness, to make space for everyone to be and know that they are beloved. We must sacrifice some “me” to gain a whole lot of “us.” As James Franklin wrote in his essay in *Belovedness*:

Sin exists as a lack of love. In this lacking space, we find belovedness hard to accept and walk the other way from it and

from Christ's love. The real sin is in treating others and ourselves as though we're not beloved by God. In walking away, we begin to believe that brokenness is the original design and we, as hurt people, hurt people in return.

Jesus calls us to love selflessly and radically. Jesus calls us to love big. Jesus calls us to give ourselves over to God's deep, abiding, selfless, perfect, complete love. Like a grain of wheat, some of our stuff, the self-oriented stuff, needs to die so that we can grow into the fullness of love God created us in and for.

Amen.