

IT'S MORE THAN JUST ADDING WATER
Crossroads Christian Fellowship, La Paz, MX/March 29, 2009/Pastor Joyce Reed

John 12:20-36 (The Message)

²⁰⁻²¹There were some Greeks in town who had come up to worship at the Feast. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee: "Sir, we want to see Jesus. Can you help us?"

²²⁻²³Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip together told Jesus. Jesus answered, "Time's up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

²⁴⁻²⁵"Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."

²⁶"If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you'll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment's notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me."

²⁷⁻²⁸"Right now I am storm-tossed. And what am I going to say? 'Father, get me out of this'? No, this is why I came in the first place. I'll say, 'Father, put your glory on display.'"

A voice came out of the sky: "I have glorified it, and I'll glorify it again."

²⁹The listening crowd said, "Thunder!"

Others said, "An angel spoke to him!"

³⁰⁻³³Jesus said, "The voice didn't come for me but for you. At this moment the world is in crisis. Now Satan, the ruler of this world, will be thrown out. And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me." He put it this way to show how he was going to be put to death.

³⁴Voices from the crowd answered, "We heard from God's Law that the Messiah lasts forever. How can it be necessary, as you put it, that the Son of Man 'be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?"

³⁵⁻³⁶Jesus said, "For a brief time still, the light is among you. Walk by the light you have so darkness doesn't destroy you. If you walk in darkness, you don't know where you're going. As you have the light, believe in the light. Then the light will be within you, and shining through your lives. You'll be children of light."

Years ago, when the Betty Crocker Company first began selling their cake mixes, they offered a product which only needed water. All you had to do was add water to the mix which came in the box, and you would get a perfect, delicious cake every time.

It bombed. No one bought it and the company couldn't understand why, so they commissioned a study which brought back a surprising answer. It seemed that people weren't buying the cake mix because it was too easy. They didn't want to be totally excluded from the work of preparing a cake; they wanted to feel that they were contributing something to it. So, Betty Crocker changed the formula and required the customer to add an egg in addition to water. Immediately, the new cake mix was a huge success.

Now many people make the same mistake when it comes to "packaging" or presenting the Christian faith. They try to make the call of Jesus Christ as easy as possible because they're afraid people won't "buy it" if it seems too hard.ⁱ

However, if you read through the Gospels, you'll notice that Jesus never "waters down" how to be one of his followers. In fact, it's quite the opposite. His criteria are not only difficult, but also bring you face-to-face with life changing choices.

And that's what our text from the Gospel of John, chapter 12, is about today.

Verse 20 tells us that a group of Greeks that had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast, approached Philip, and asked to see Jesus. Philip is a Greek name and probably the reason he was singled out.

Now, why would Greeks be celebrating the Passover, and seeking out Jesus? Well, there was a group of Greeks in Jesus' day known as God-fearers. These were people attracted to Judaism for its monotheism and morality. They were allowed to worship in the outer court of the Temple, which was called "The Court of the Gentiles."ⁱⁱ But that is as far as they were allowed in. They were still considered outside the promises of Israel, part of the *goyim*, the foreign nations.

Obviously, these Greeks had heard strange stories about this Jesus who some people said was the Messiah of Israel. But this Jesus wasn't a Messiah like a lot of the Jews expected—there was no exclusive nationalism in his message about the kingdom of his Father. In fact, they heard that he associated with the pagans; they heard that his kingdom might just have room for people like them, those outside Abraham's offspring.

And so they walk up to Philip and say, "We want to see Jesus." The Greek word "see" means "to have an interview with." In other words, this man intrigues us. Does everything we've heard about him match who he is in person? We want to check him out. We want to see him.

Philip seems startled by their request. You can almost hear him thinking, if not actually saying out loud, "Why?" And he goes to get Andrew and asks his opinion. And after a mini consult, then they both went and told Jesus.

Why? Why do you want to see Jesus? Would you have an answer if someone asked you that question? It's not the typical evangelistic question. Usually we hear: "*Do you love Jesus?*" or "*Do you know Jesus?*" But here's a question that unsettles us where we're at: *Why do you want to see him? Why?* Feel the weight of the question. Let it sink deep—past all that abstract, surface religiosity.

If we follow John's story up until this point, we—like the Greeks—can feel our desires forming, our expectations shaped. We find ourselves along side the characters in the story, as they experience the wonders of this Jesus. In John 2, at a wedding in Cana, Jesus changes water into really good wine. And then we watch as Jesus disturbs the oppressive system of exchange in the Temple courts. In John 4, Jesus associates with Samaritan women, outsiders, lowlifes. Later he even transgresses the boundaries between friend and enemy when he heals the son of a powerful Roman official, a figurehead of foreign occupation, of oppression. In John 5 Jesus heals a crippled man at the pools of Bethesda. In John 6, he feeds the multitudes with 5 loaves and 2 fish. And, probably the most incredible event of all, in John 11, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead!

Who is this man, this Jesus? Isn't everyone saying that he might be the one Israel has been waiting for? Could he be the Messiah, the redeemer of the Jews?

That's the expectation that John keeps building as we come to this passage in John 12. We want to see him because he is the Messiah. He is the one who will set God's people free from foreign dominion, free from the prince of this world, and lead the people into life without end, unceasing flourishing. This is the king, the Messiah, who will triumph over all the enemies.

Is this why you want to see him? Is that what you want to see? A Jesus ready for battle, armed and dangerous, prepared to vanquish the enemies of God. A Jesus that looks like a super hero ready to take on the evils of this world.

If I'm honest with myself, some days that's the kind of Jesus I want. Everyday I read the news on the internet and see that this world is falling apart. More deaths in Baghdad. Nuclear weapons tested in Korea. Companies on the brink of economic disaster. The other day I wanted to see this glorious Jesus do his thing when I prayed for my cousin who is contemplating divorce after 15 years of marriage.

I want to see Jesus. I want to see this Jesus ready for war against God's enemies, that complex web of evil, the prince of this world, that squelching spirit of death. I'm tired of the captivity. I'm weary of oppression. The darkness overwhelms. How much more tragedy? How much more pain? How much more suffering do I have to watch? When will it end? *"Excuse me, Philip. I would like to see Jesus."*ⁱⁱⁱ

And Jesus answers the cries of the people. He says, *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"* (Jn.12:23). The time is now. Here he is—ready to vanquish the reign of darkness with his glorious light. Towards the end of the passage Jesus says, *"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out"* (v 31). The people are ready to rise up and join the Messiah in a revolution. The people are buzzing with excitement. Now will come the victory over pain and death and suffering that is too wonderful for words.

And in the frenzy of ecstatic longing, Jesus says something that defies all expectation, all assumptions of victory... No one would ever think of this next turn, this abrupt halt in the triumphal march. He says,

²⁴⁻²⁶*"Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many*

times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal. "If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you'll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment's notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me.

And in case we are too dense to get the drift of what Jesus is talking about, John adds something at the end of our passage to make it crystal clear: “*He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die*” (v 33). Is this the one we have come to see? Is this the Messiah? But why then is he talking about death? It’s not supposed to be like this.^{iv}

Have you ever noticed that when Jesus wants to teach us about how to understand the Kingdom of God, he repeatedly turns to the things of the earth to describe the things of heaven: yeast, seeds, dirt, water, fish, lilies of the field, birds of the air. Again and again he employs the ephemeral as he seeks to explain what is eternal. His doing so both comforts and unsettles; taking what is familiar to us, he turns it on its head, and us as well.^v

He reminds his listeners, and us, that a grain of wheat cannot produce many seeds unless it is placed in the ground, covered with earth, allowed to die, so that it then can offer new life. He is offering an explanation about his impending death. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He goes on to say that if you want to serve me, then you’ll follow me. As you serve and follow me, you will be where I am. Jesus is pointing us to a cross-shaped life.

If we go back to our cake analogy: Jesus is making the cake from scratch . . . and it’s usually at this point that we want to go back to the box cake that just adds water. We try to disconnect all the dots that lead to the cross.

We try to fit Jesus in to our way of doing things, to do things in his name but to do them our way. We want to serve Jesus following our agenda, not his. We like to twist Jesus’ words slightly and contract him to come with us, where we want to go . . . instead of us following where he wants to go. We’ve decided that Jesus has a supporting role, so don't mention the *D* word (death), and don't wrench us around to follow his cross-shaped life.

But Jesus did not come to remind us how to live our lives. Or to be a footnote to our existence. He wants to be the Owner of our lives, to turn them around. He wants to be our Savior and our Lord. He doesn't just fit in with your life, helping you cope with its ups and downs—he confronts you, me, with a completely different life. He doesn't follow you. He doesn’t follow me. He wants you and me to follow him.^{vi}

Like the wheat seed being plunged into the darkness of the earth, Jesus urges us to go into the questions, the mysteries, the paradoxes, the seeming contradictions. Go into the dying that is not dying after all. We work so very hard at letting go. But what if it is not about letting go, or giving up . . . but about giving in? Falling into dirt, as Jesus says here. Going where the seed of wheat is supposed to go. Following the spiral within the seed that takes us deeper into the dark but also—finally, fruitfully—out of it. Into the light.^{vii}

Where is Jesus calling you to die, so that you might live?

This is the scandal of Jesus, the provocation of the gospel. Jesus comes to die at the hands of his enemies, and through this death he dismantles the dominion of darkness, the reign of evil. And through his resurrection, unceasing life is made available for all. But the victory passes through death—and that goes against all our expectations.

Redemption passes through death. Christ is killed in Jerusalem. He isn't crowned in a temple or palace after the so-called triumphal entry. No. He's led to Golgotha, outside the kingly splendor of Jerusalem. And dies. Nailed to the cross. Crown of thorns on his head, not gold. What sort of victory is this? How does this death reveal God's glory?

So, we come to Jesus for an answer. We come to Jesus with our requests, with our desires for his decisive victory right now over the prince of this world who attempts to suffocate us with evil—bad news everyday. I would like to see Jesus so I can catch a glimpse of this conquering king and return home with my confidence restored, knowing that Jesus is taking his throne.

But as I come, as we see this Jesus, we discover that his throne is a cross. And if the shock of that sight is not enough, he tells us that we can't go back to the way things were, back to a cake-box Christianity—reading about the darkness outside our four walls and looking through our Bibles for the right answers to everyone's problems, without ever leaving our controlled environment, our stable social lives:

"The one who loves his life will lose it, while the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me." (v. 25-26)

Where is Jesus calling you to die so that you might live?

As the Greeks said, "*We want to see Jesus.*" Do you want to see him? I know I want to. But I have to realize that seeing comes at a cost. It will cost me my life. Like the song says: "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back."

We come to see Jesus and his glorious kingdom as we walk down his path, a journey that leads to a cross, to death . . . but also to an empty tomb and a resurrected Lord.

And as we give up our lives, the control of our direction, we may come to see that our path through this present darkness is actually a river of life flowing from that resurrected body of Jesus.^{viii}

Evangelist Tony Campolo shares about attending his first black funeral when he was 16 years old. He says:

A friend of mine, Clarence, had died. The pastor was incredible. From the pulpit he talked about the Resurrection in beautiful terms. He had us thrilled. He came down from the pulpit, went to the family, and comforted them from the fourteenth chapter of John. "Let not your heart be troubled," he said, "'You believe in God, believe also in me,' said Jesus. Clarence has gone to heavenly mansions."

Then, for the last 20 minutes of the sermon, he actually preached to the open casket. Now, that's drama! He yelled at the corpse: "Clarence! Clarence!" He said it with such authority. I would not have been surprised had there been an answer. He said, "Clarence, there were a lot of things we should have said to you that we never said to you. You got away too fast, Clarence. You got away too fast." He went down this litany of beautiful things that Clarence had done for people. When he finished—here's the dramatic part—he said, "That's it, Clarence. There's nothing more to say. When there's nothing more to say, there's only one thing to say. Good night. Good night, Clarence!" He grabbed the lid of the casket and slammed it shut. "Good night, Clarence!" *Boom!*

Shock waves went over the congregation. As the preacher then lifted his head, you could see there was this smile on his face. He said, "Good night, Clarence. Good night, Clarence, because I know, I know that God is going to give you a good morning!" The choir stood and starting singing, "On that great morning, we shall rise, we shall rise." We were dancing in the aisles and hugging each other. I knew the joy of the Lord, a joy that in the face of death laughs and sings and dances, for there is no sting to death.^{ix}

If you're not a follower of Jesus, it's impossible to understand the triumph of the cross. To fully grasp how death can lead to life. It's like walking in the darkness. It doesn't make sense. Because the Christian faith does not come in a box where you just add water and the result is a 7-layer, beautifully decorated theological treatise.

The Christian faith is a relationship. It's a choice to be in a relationship with Jesus. It starts from scratch. Just you and him. He offers a new way of life, and you choose to follow. Letting the old way of life die so that the new life can emerge. It's not easy. If anyone has ever told you that following Jesus is easy, they lied. Saying to Jesus, "YES, I want a relationship with you" . . . that's the easy part. But following Jesus, that's hard.

Like a grain of wheat, you have to be willing to be pushed deep into the dark places . . . places where you must die to self, in order that God can resurrect you to new life in him. Falling into dirt. Falling into the mystery of God. Not giving up, but giving in.

Where is Jesus calling you to die, so that you might live?

What are you holding on to, rather than following Jesus?

Don't settle for box-cake Christianity.

Instead, I challenge you to follow Jesus and discover what a relationship with God is all about.

Let's pray . . .

Footnotes:

i. Illustration from “A Grain of Fallen Wheat” at <http://www.esermons.com>

ii. Bruce, F.F. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983, pages 262-263.

iii. *We Would See Jesus. Excerpts from* a sermon by Isaac, a Mennonite Pastor at Chapel Hills Mennonite Fellowship in NCr, March 29, 2006, found on the web site <http://www.rustyparts.com/wp/2006/03/29/we-would-like-to-see-jesus-a-sermon-on-john-1220-33/>

iv. Ibid.

v. Blog called “Into the Seed”, March 24, 2009 by Jan Richardson from <http://paintedprayerbook.com>

vi. Quicke, Michael. “Insiders and Outsiders” excerpt from sermon www.preachingtoday.com

vii. Blog called “Into the Seed”, March 24, 2009 by Jan Richardson from <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>

viii. Quicke. Op cit.

ix. Tony Campolo, in the sermon "The Year of Jubilee," www.PreachingToday.com
