

“Lifted for What?”  
Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10;  
John 12:20-33

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John is my favorite gospel. I was a philosophy major in college, and I love the way that it twists and turns. I love the way that it is big and esoteric. John just swings for the fences. I love that so much about John's gospel. Are you allowed to say which is your favorite gospel? Is that like saying you have a favorite child or favorite parent? John is always my favorite.

The last time I preached, I was doing some research on John and one of the things I discovered was that John's gospel was the last one written, and it was written to help those in the faith who were struggling in the face of persecution, struggling with the thought that Jesus was supposed to come back and we're still here waiting, and things are still hard, and there's not this huge acceptance. John's gospel in some way is a “stay in it, stick with it, this is still good news” gospel.

I couldn't help but have those lenses on when I was reading this passage this week. This passage doesn't take place in the other gospels. This is a story that John, late in life, felt like the early church needed to hear, but had not been written down previously. There's something about this story that said to them, “Stay in it. Stay with it. God is still good.” I felt that as I was reading it this week, so keep that at the back of your mind—a lens to see the story through.

There's a pattern in John's gospel that I love. It's really in all the gospels; I just see it the most in John. There's a big, fancy Greek word for this pattern, but I don't know what it is. It's a pattern where somebody comes up to Jesus with a relatively simple question, and Jesus gives an answer that at first doesn't seem to have anything to do with the question that was originally asked, but in fact is digging deeper into a spiritual undertone of the very question.

You see it in John's gospel with Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and says, “All the Pharisees know you must be from God.” Jesus' response is, “You must be born again,” and Nicodemus is confused. Or when Jesus talks to the woman at the well, and she asks, “How can you ask me for a drink?” and he says, “You should have asked me for living water.” And again, she is confused. But in all those instances, Jesus digs into a deeper spiritual reality. He finds something deep and good underneath the question.

That happens here. Some Greeks show up and ask if they can talk to Jesus, if they can have an audience with Jesus. On the surface this seems like a relatively simple question, but it is one that Jesus unpacks for spiritual depth. I think we have to understand some of the reasons why this might not be just a simple question.

As I mentioned earlier, this takes place after Jesus enters Jerusalem for his final week of life, so some commentators have speculated that this whole series takes place within the temple walls. Jesus, as a Jewish man, at least at this point in good standing—in a couple of days it will be different—is able to go pretty deep into the temple. He is past the outer gates. These Greeks, regardless of their fidelity to Yahweh, are restricted to the outer gates of the court, to the places where the Gentiles are allowed to be. Part of the

reason they may be asking to speak to Jesus instead of just going to Jesus is that there's a wall of separation between them and where Jesus is. So what do they do? They find Philip.

Philip and Andrew, who later shows up in this passage, are the two disciples of Jesus with Greek names. It's mentioned in the passage that they are from the region of Galilee, Bethsaida, which is a cosmopolitan area with Greeks and Jews living together, unlike the more rural parts of Galilee that most of Jesus' disciples come from. In this kind of scary ask—will Jesus come out to us; will Jesus move in our direction—they find the disciples that they are most comfortable with. The disciples that have an accent most like theirs. The disciples who have names like theirs. The disciples who grew up in an area where they would have interacted with each other. How often in our world do we see this play out? When we're looking for a liaison to help us cross a barrier in our society, we look for someone who feels safe. Someone who looks like us. Someone who can cross those barriers for us.

And they do. They come to Jesus and ask, "Will you go see these Greeks?" This mirrors the end of Chapter 11, which we don't have in our text this week, with the Pharisees plotting to kill Jesus after the Triumphal Entry, saying the whole world is going to come to him. And Jesus, just like the Pharisees, see these Greeks as a sign that that is happening. The world is starting to come to Jesus.

So his answer can't be, "Sure, I'll go chat with them for a little bit," because Jesus knows that while he can walk around that wall and talk to the Greeks and tell them about the good news of the kingdom, that he is only one seed. The wall will still be there after he goes and talks to them. The wall of separation will still exist after he goes and talks to them. Jesus sees the deeper problem that is at play here, and that is that there is a spiritual, a legal, a physical separation between the good news of God, of God's very presence, and this life-giving seed full of power and potential that is Jesus. There is a physical separation between God and the world that God so dearly loves. It's not enough for Jesus to walk around that wall one time to talk to one group of Greeks. Jesus didn't come to talk to one group of people at a time. Jesus came to transform the entire world, so the whole world will know that God is a God that loves them. That God is a God who restores them. That God is a God who fights for them. That God is a God who is breathing a new thing into creation, which is in fact the old thing that creation was meant to be about in the first place.

Jesus, again, answers a simple question with this description of his death: Unless a seed falls to the ground it is only one seed, but once it falls and it dies it becomes a fruitful plant. Jesus sees this moment of the Greeks saying, "It's time for us to come in and to enter the kingdom as well," as the initiation of what he is going to need to do for the whole world to come to God. As Jesus is lifted up on the cross the world will be able to come to him. As Jesus describes it, that is what it means for him to talk to those Greeks. It's not a matter of a couple of steps. It's a matter of his death.

But he doesn't stop there. He turns to his disciples and says, "And you as well. If you want to follow me, you have to follow me. If you want to go where I'm going, achieve the things I'm achieving, if you long for the kingdom I'm bringing into this world, then you, too, must be willing to lay down your comforts. You must be willing to lay down your lives, your advantages, your privileges to make it possible. Seriously, it is not just my death that is

going to undo these spiritual realities, undo these physical realities, undo these systemic realities. It is ours, together. Follow me in this. Sacrifice with me in this. It's not enough for you to say, 'Jesus I believe you're going to do it,' and then go on your way. Follow me. Come with me."

Then we have some sections I wish I had more time to go into. There's something so humanizing about hearing Jesus say, "I don't want to die. This is the cost for there not to be a wall separating God's people from God's people anymore. This is what it's going to cost for there not to be a wall that separates God from humanity anymore. But I don't want to pay it. I don't want to feel it." These moments of Jesus' humanity and his fear in the face of death remind us that the cross was not a costless enterprise. He was not a superhuman who felt no pain.

Then there's this moment of the Father speaking of his glory. "I have glorified my name and I will glorify it again, most likely a reference to the fact that I glorified my name by sending you into the world, Jesus, and my name will be glorified again in your death." There's a wealth of ground to be covered in why some hear thunder and some hear the word—another John theme, only a few hear.

But I want to focus the remainder of our time on Jesus' description of what his judgment of the world is. I don't know about you, but when I hear Jesus say judgment has come into the world, I expect him to point judgment at us. That's just the way I'm wired. I'm very aware of my own failings on a regular basis. Judgment has come into the world: You spend too much time on the internet. Judgment has come into the world: Maybe a little less time in front of the mirror. But that's not what Jesus says. He said judgement has come into the world and the ruler of this world will be thrown out. I think sometimes we're a little uncomfortable with this kind of language from Jesus. Jesus isn't talking about personal sin right now. He isn't talking about these things that we so often associate his atonement with. He is talking about a spiritual overthrow of evil, a spiritual overthrow of spiritual evil, of Satan. I think we have to sit with that for a moment.

About ten years ago I was working at a book table at an InterVarsity conference. I had a lot of hours at this table, so I perused all the books. One of them was a book called *Four Views of the Atonement*. When I read the title, I thought, "There's more than one view of the atonement?" So I picked up the book and one of the views presented was by a theologian in St. Paul named Greg Boyd. It was the Christ as Victor view of the atonement. In his belief, if you asked a first or second century Christian what was accomplished on the cross, the most common answer you would have heard, according to his reading of original writings, was that the devil was defeated. The primary work of the cross was the defeat of Satan.

Now, I will say the kaleidoscope view that combined our own normal atonement / sin was satisfied on Jesus / ultimate sacrifice was my favorite view in the book, but I was compelled by this Christ as Victor idea. I think if we took John 12 by itself from the rest of scripture, which is very dangerous to do – don't do it – but if we did, I think we would see what Jesus says his death is for. To defeat the devil. To defeat evil. To overthrow the ruler of this world. We have to grow some level of comfort with the reality that Jesus' work is not just to forgive us. It's not just to forgive a sin or mistake here and there. It's not just to mark individuals as fit for heaven. But it is also to overthrow evil in our world, wholesale, all together. Evil was dealt a mortal blow on the cross, and while the death pangs have

been long and painful, this week we are reminded again of how long and painful those death pangs have been and continue to be in our world. Jesus came to defeat the devil, to overthrow evil on its very own ground. Which, I think, leaves us in an interesting spot in this passage.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I hang out with groups of Christians and they love to pray, they love to cast out the devil, call evil things evil, declare God's victory, and then walk away as if the prayer itself was the end of their discipleship. And I hang out with other groups of Christians. Maybe I'm more inclined like this group that is always ready for the fight, always ready to dig into the things of God, always ready to get their hands dirty to advocate, to work, to labor towards the good things they believe God is about, but don't believe and don't function like there are spiritual forces behind those things they are combating.

The reality is Jesus saw our world as cross-sized problems, and cross-sized problems require both our hands willing to get dirty and to sacrifice like Jesus. To lay down our lives for the things we believe in. To fight and to yell and to advocate until we have callouses on our hands and no voice left. To give up everything to see God's purposes to come into reality. And cross-sized problems require that we live and pray and believe that the ultimate victory is achieved by Jesus, and Jesus alone. That wall that separates the Greeks and the Jews, that separates the outsiders from the inner courts of the temple and from the very presence of God cannot be torn down by human hands. It must be torn down by a spiritual power that is greater than the one that built the wall in the first place. And we are called to put our hands on and push against that wall as well. Spirituality is a both/and way of living. It is a participatory discipleship that relies on the power of God and not our own strength, but man, do we fight for it.

That is the tension and that is the world view that we enter into in Lent. We don't enter into Lent just to tell God we are thankful by giving up sugar or alcohol or caffeine for 40 days. We enter into Lent by acknowledging our bodies, our flesh, our world views, our ideas, are not enough to change this world. We fast to recognize our own weakness. But God, we also pray that you would show us where to partner with you. Where to partner with your spiritual power. Where to partner in your death and where to share in your resurrection that changes this world.

I don't know about you, but when I have a week like this that I feel like I'm staring down the barrel of fallen humanity, where I'm staring down the barrel of just how fallen we are and just how broken this world is, I want to have something to do. I want to get my hands dirty. I want to yell until my voice is hoarse. But there is something better and I need to acknowledge that only God can win the victory, and that victory looks like death. That victory looks like a cross. Jesus must be lifted for all to come to him.

So, I invite us to see the cross again. To see the cross as the initiation of a new kingdom. To see the cross as the overthrow of the old. To see the cross as the defeat of evil and the birth of good. And I want us to remember to see the cross as an invitation for us to give up the things that we have that keep us comfortable and to enter into the fray with Jesus with all of our hearts, and all of our souls, and with all of our minds and strength. Amen.