

John 12:20-33

If we were to ever consider mounting a plaque on this pulpit, the words we should put on that plaque are these words from our text: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” We’re not told if the Greeks of our text ever got that opportunity. They asked their request of Philip, Philip told Andrew, and together they went and told Jesus. No preacher today can go back in time and bring those Greeks to Jesus. But every preacher today needs to heed their request for the sake of his hearers. There is no greater task for the preacher than to let his congregation see Jesus. He is to imitate the words of the Apostle Paul every time he steps into his pulpit: “We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord.”

Tragically, today, very few hearers are able to see Jesus because modern preaching is more about keeping the hearers entertained than preaching “Christ and Him crucified.” Contrary to popular belief, the preacher is not to give his hearers what they want. He is not to “tickle their ears” and say things just to keep them coming back. The preacher is to let his hearers see Jesus—and there is only one way that we can see Jesus—we must look to the bloody figure on the cross.

The cross is not just the symbol of Lent, it is the sum and substance of the Christian Faith. If you desire to be a Christian, then your life must be shaped by the cross. The words of our text that Jesus uses to explain this are rather difficult for us to hear: “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:25)

He is not talking about a “love-hate” relationship that we have with our self. One day we’re up, the next day we’re down. When things in life are going well, we love life, when things are not well, we hate it. Rather, Jesus is speaking about such words as we confessed earlier, “I, a poor, miserable sinner.” What a hateful thing to say about yourself! Today’s psychiatrists would have a fit if they heard their patients saying such things. “Be positive!” is their advice. “Have a good attitude toward yourself.” But that is not what our Lord says...“the man who loves his life will lose it.”

In Jesus’ parable in Luke 18, the Pharisee in the temple loved his life. He had no struggles within his heart and mind. He was very content with how he himself was living. He may not have been wealthy. He may not have had many close friends. But that was all beside the point. He loved his life, and he believed that God loved it too. His prayer echoed these thoughts: “I thank Thee that I am not as other people; swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes of all that I get.” The reason why he loved his life is because he felt that God loved it. A life with few flaws. A life God couldn’t help but love. Jesus tells us, however, that this man did not go to his home forgiven. “He who loves his life will lose it.”

If you love your life, then your life is not shaped by the cross. The Pharisee in the temple had no need for the cross. He was, in his own eyes, doing fine without it. On the other hand, the tax collector’s life was shaped by the cross. His prayer was not about how he loved himself, but how he needed the cross. He hated his life. “Be merciful to me, the sinner!” he cried. He had nothing to boast of before God. He may have had many friends. He may have been very wealthy. None of that mattered. He hated his life because he knew that God hated it. If God was not pleased with how he lived, how could he be pleased?

To “hate your life in this world” is to be as that tax collector—to confess, “There is nothing good in me;” “O wretched man that I am,” we mourn with St. Paul; “I am a poor, miserable sinner.” That tax collector, says Jesus, went to his home forgiven. For “he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” If you love your life, then you don’t need Jesus and His cross. But if you hate your life, then Jesus and His cross is for you, and you, my friend, will keep your life eternally in heaven.

The reason for this is that Christ hated His life for you. He did not love His life, He hated it. He lost His life willingly at the cross so that you can keep your life forever. Jesus did not cling to life; He clung to the cross for you. He clung there with your sins. Every sin which is repulsive to God was carried in the flesh of Jesus. And He, therefore, was hated by His Father. Jesus, the Beloved Son of God; He with whom the Father is well-pleased, was hated and rejected by Him on the cross, because He became sin for us.

And because He did this you have life in Him. Every gardener knows that to bring forth a harvest, he or she must bury the seed in the ground. The gardener must “hate” the seed. He must bury it. He must kill it. The seed must die before it produces a harvest. “But if it dies,” says Jesus, “it produces many seeds.” Jesus died for you. Your life comes from His death. He hated His life. He went to the cross. He died and was buried so that you may keep your life for all eternity.

You are the harvest. Your faith in Christ, your love for the Lord is the product, the fruit which has come from Jesus’ death for you. And when you were baptized into Christ, His death gave you life there, for the life you now live is His life in you.

You may recognize these words of Jesus in our text as words that are sometimes read at the burial of a Christian: “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed, but if it dies it produces many seeds.” Because Jesus did not love His life; because He was willing to die the death of the sinner, all who trust in Him are absolutely certain of eternal life. When the body of a Christian is buried in the ground there is no need for despair, for the one “who hates his life will keep it for eternal life.” These Christians are simply following where our Lord has gone. He died and was buried. They, who died with Christ in baptism, die and are buried. And as He rose so they shall rise again. To die in Christ is to be raised again at the harvest.

Jesus says, “Where I am, there My servant will also be.” Jesus is in the water of Holy Baptism. Jesus is in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Jesus is in His preached Word—His blessed Word of Pardon. That is why you, His servants, are also found in these holy things. If you love your life you will have no need for Jesus’ Word and Sacraments. But if you hate your life; if you confess that you are a poor, wretched sinner, then you will love His Word of Life for you. You will love His forgiveness for you. And these are yours. You are forgiven of your sins. You do have life eternal in Jesus Christ. He gives these gifts to you because He died for you. And no matter how wretched you are, these cannot be taken from you. The more you hate your life, the more He forgives you. And because, where Jesus is, there His servant will be, one day you, too, will be buried in the ground so that He may, on the great Day of Harvest, raise you up to be with Him forever.

“Sir,” the Greeks told Philip, “we would like to see Jesus.” What a wonderful thing to write on a Christian pulpit. And on the tombstone of every Christian who dies in Christ, we could write these words, “This child of God hated his life, but he is loved by the Lord Jesus. He is forgiven. And he, who would see Jesus, now sees Him face to face.” Amen.