

What R U Up 2?

March 18, 2018

Title: Lift Up

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

It was Passover – a high holy time – and Jesus and his disciples, like most good Jews, were in Jerusalem for the celebration. During the last couple of years – and especially this Passover, it was a time of increased stress for the Roman authorities. Passover was the time when Jews remembered God setting them free from slavery in Egypt. Because of that, it was a time when the Roman authorities were very concerned that with thousands of extra Jews, stirred up by religious fervor, there could be a revolt. So security was tighter than usual.

For the Jewish religious leaders, it was also a time of additional stress. They were becoming more concerned about this man Jesus and the crowds that followed him. They were concerned that he or his followers might do something to upset the delicate balance and relative peace that they had with the Roman civil authorities.

In the chapter before today's Gospel reading, Jesus had visited his friends Mary and Martha. Their brother Lazarus had just died, and Jesus had gone to Bethany and raised him from the dead. Some of the Jews who saw this put their faith in Jesus, but others went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

The Chief Priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin to talk about Jesus and their great concern. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:47b-48 NIV) As people began to arrive in

Jerusalem for Passover, they kept an eye out and watched to see if Jesus would appear. They had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it, so they might arrest him.

This was the climate in Jerusalem leading into Passover. In John's gospel, when he describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday, the Pharisees again express their concern. "look how the whole world has gone after him!" Then, as if to prove their point, today's gospel begins with the observation that there were Greeks among those who had come to worship, and they came to Philip, one of Jesus' disciples, with the request to see Jesus.

What was it about Jesus that attracted people to him? What was it that had people taking risks to come and see him? Throughout his life we see crowds gathering to catch a glimpse of him. We see people who are sick or disabled coming to him for healing. We see fishermen leaving their nets and boats and following him. The poor gathered around him. Outcasts felt welcomed, loved and accepted. Parents brought children to see him. People believed that somehow, he had the answer to their problems. Why?ⁱ

Jesus brought good news to people who were struggling. He healed the sick. He practiced what he preached. He treated each person as someone who was special. Religion for many had become cold, restrictive, full of laws and sometimes even abusive and exploitive. Religion for many did not speak to their hurts. It did not bring them joy. Jesus brought something new, radical, full of love and inclusion, full of hope and joy; they were excited by him and came to learn more, to follow him.

It had been similar many many years earlier when the prophet Jeremiah spoke to his people. The Israelite people, at that time, were living

in exile in Babylon, far from home. They had no king, no temple, no priests. Their previous way of life no longer existed. Nothing made sense to them anymore. They were desperate. Earlier Jeremiah had warned them of the coming destruction. He had warned them to give up their idolatry and injustice. When Babylon took control of Judah, their land, he told them that God was using Babylon to punish them for breaking their covenant with God.

The first covenant with God had been through Moses, when God gave them the Ten Commandments and they broke this covenant over and over again. Many years later, God had established another covenant with them through David. However, they began to develop a false confidence that God would always take care of them no matter what they did. They became increasingly unfaithful to God's way, and eventually this led to invasion, conquest, and exile.

Now, Jeremiah is telling them about a new covenant. Unlike the previous covenants, this covenant would be written on their hearts. God pledged to forgive and forget what they had done, and now they would be able to follow this covenant because they didn't need to learn and follow a bunch of laws, but rather God would transform them from the inside out so that this could be an everlasting covenant; people would know it in their hearts.

When they were desperate and without hope, God didn't offer them a self-help program. God didn't tell them to try harder. Instead, Jeremiah told them to listen to what God was up to. This new covenant would require them to pay attention to the new things God was doing.

Sometimes in our lives it seems as if everything is going wrong. Sometimes congregations can become discouraged and feel that no matter

how hard they try, they can't seem to do anything that makes a difference. They can't turn around declining worship attendance or dwindling finances. Being human, we tend to dig in and try to do the same things with a greater effort. Maybe at these times, what we need to do is to stop, and listen. Pay attention to what God is doing.

“When we find ourselves in an unfamiliar landscape where the old ways don't work, and we feel lost, our first step is to look and listen for what God is up to. We will miss it if we try harder or get busier. Our God is always doing `a new thing'; the law within us written on our hearts requires attentiveness.”ⁱⁱ

There was one thing that God did at the very beginning of creation that has interfered with everything God has tried to do to have a loving relationship with humanity. God gave us free will. God loves us unconditionally, but God also wants to be loved and love cannot be compelled. So, throughout history, despite everything God has done to show us God's great love for us, there have been large numbers of people who have not returned that love. We have too often chosen to listen to our own ways rather than to listen to God and ask what new thing God is doing.

Now, people were coming to Jesus. At the beginning of Passover, even some Greeks were coming to see Jesus. This new thing would only have reinforced for the Pharisees how dangerous Jesus was becoming. It only served to convince them that Jesus would have to die. Jesus knew this. He knew that the presence of the Greeks was one more sign that the time had come for him to die.

Jesus didn't want to die. In a section where Jesus is incredibly honest with the people around him, he says, that his soul is troubled. Let that sink in for a minute. When things aren't going the way we want them to, our

tendency is to want to find someone or something to blame. We want to escape from whatever feelings we are having. But here, in today's gospel, Jesus offers us another way. "A troubled soul." Even while sharing that his soul is troubled, he recognizes that it is for this reason that he has come.

What if, like Jesus, "instead of trying to run away from the troubling in our souls, we moved toward it? What if we got curious about what that troubling might signify, what God might be up to within us?" Maybe God is calling us to a new path, to something new. The path ahead is troubling for Jesus, but at the same time, "he understands it as the way to reveal God's love for the whole world."ⁱⁱⁱ

With the snow still on the ground, and more predicted for this week, it seems strange to think about the image Jesus uses to describe his death. He says that "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." I am not a gardener by any means, but I do have a pretty good idea what most seeds look like. They are small, typically brown, grey, black, or white. They are dry and hard. Yet, when planted in the soil, and when tended, they produce plants that look nothing like the seed that we put in the soil. Different seeds produce different kinds of plants, but none of them look like the seed from which they came.

The absolutely gorgeous flowers that we will see this spring and summer came from seeds or bulbs that bear no resemblance to the magnificent flower they become. It is something that only the mysterious ways of God can explain.

Jesus, one man, the son of God, would die, but from his death would come incredible new life. On Easter, we will celebrate what we call resurrection – Jesus coming back to life. But today, think for a minute of

the new life that comes from a seed that is planted. Think about the new life that comes when we are willing to let go of the seed and surrender it to the soil. If we hold onto it and refuse to plant it, it will never be more than a dead seed. But if we surrender it to the earth, it can become a magnificent sign of new life.

This can be true for us as well. If we try to keep our seed safe, keep our lives the way they have always been, refuse to be open to new possibilities, cherish what we have, nothing can grow or lead to new life or new fruit. The seed must “die”, break open and transform into a flower that is not longer recognizable as a seed.

“Jesus invites us to learn from the seed. We too, can let ways of being in the world, ways of thinking, ways of being church die so they break open and are completely transformed by God to bear fruit in the world.”^{iv} The catch is that what grows may not look anything like what we currently recognize and cherish. The new thing that God is doing may be very different than what we can imagine. That requires us to trust God. It requires us to have courage that the new thing that God is doing will bear fruit beyond what we can imagine.

Jesus says that “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” He was explaining here that he would die by crucifixion, be lifted up above the earth to die. But he is also telling us that his death is to show God’s love for all people – the Greeks who came to see him, the people who stood by the side of the road, the Pharisees who plotted against him, the people who lived so far away that they had never heard of him, even those in the Roman government. He would draw all people to him; those in authority and those with no power, those on the inside and those on the outside, those with great wealth and those who lived in

poverty – all people, without exception are called by the God whose love has no limits.

We can reject that love, and many do. We can turn away from God, and many do. God gave us freedom – free will – so that our decision to respond to God’s love with our own would be a free decision. God gave us free will so that our decision to protect the vulnerable, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the shut-ins, to heal the sick would be our decision. In doing that we are sharing and showing God’s love.

James W. Moore in his book “The Common People Heard Him Gladly” tells a story – probably apocryphal – about a little dog that had been hit by a car and left wounded by the side of the road. A kindhearted doctor drove by and saw the injured dog. Carefully he picked up the dog and took him home. He examined him, cleaned his wounds, and gave the little dog tender love and care. He wanted to let the dog spend the night, so he could check him again in the morning and prepared a place for the dog in his garage. As he carried the dog to the garage, the dog suddenly jumped from his arms and ran off. “What an ungrateful little mutt, the doctor said to himself, with a smile. The next morning, the doctor realized how wrong he was.... There was an urgent scratching at his front door. When he opened it, there was the little dog he had treated. The dog had come back, but this time the dog was not alone. With him was another hurt dog!”

Moore writes that this is the story of the “Ripple Effect”. “Throw a stone into a lake; the water then ripples out and the circle widens. One of the great characteristics of the first Christians was their ripple effect. Something wonderful had happened to them. Jesus Christ, the Great Physician, had touched their hurt lives and brought healing and wholeness. These persons were so filled with joy and gladness that they just could not

contain it. They had to share it. ... It spread out among the people in a ripple effect. And the circle grew wider and wider. It was the 'Each one Teach one', 'Each One Bring One,' 'Each One Tell One' method and it worked.”^v

This is still the best way of spreading the good news. This is still the invitation to us today. Jesus said that when he was lifted up all people would be drawn to him. “To be lifted up is to be drawn into the love of God. Jesus drew all kinds of people to him during his short tenure on earth, drawing no boundaries for who was invited into that love. As his hour to die drew nearer, he spread the message that all things would be enveloped in his love even after he was gone. What uplifting message will we pass on to others?”^{vi}

ⁱ The gist of this is adapted from James W Moore – “The Common People Heard Him Gladly”. This section from his introduction. P.10.

ⁱⁱ Upper Room Disciplines 2018, March 16, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, March 17.

^{iv} Ibid, March 12

^v Moore, James W. pp.19-20

^{vi} McFee, Marcia, “Worship Design Studio”