

**John 12: 20-33**  
**March 18, 2018**  
**Fifth Sunday of Lent**

This episode takes place *after* Jesus has entered Jerusalem—after Palm Sunday. Some Greeks are in the city and have come to the disciple Phillip asking to see Jesus. It is clear that these are Gentiles unconnected with the Jewish faith. They are not here to celebrate the Passover. They have come to “see” Jesus. Phillip finds Andrew and together they go to tell Jesus. The Greeks are not mentioned again. Their role has been to instigate the series of events. Upon hearing their message Jesus makes a surprising announcement. “*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*” To be glorified is to be recognized as who God and Jesus truly are. In the case of Jesus it means that Jesus will be revealed in his completeness as the only begotten son of God.

Yet what are we to make of “the hour” which has come? Throughout John Jesus is presented with opportunities to be revealed as who he is and he avoids them because his time had not yet come. Now, it seems his *hour* or time *has come*.

Jesus’ next statement seems strange—completely unrelated to the arrival of the Greeks and the Jesus’ *hour*: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain—isolated and alone. But if the grain does die it bears much fruit.” What Jesus says next also seems strange. “Those who love their life in this world lose it. Those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” What does this have to do with a grain of wheat falling into the ground? What does it have to do with the arrival of Jesus’ *hour*? What does it have to do with some Greeks coming to Jerusalem to see Jesus?

As if to conclude the teaching, Jesus announces, “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant will be also. Whoever serves me the Father will honor.”

So what do we have here? Phillip and Andrew tell Jesus some Gentile Greeks want to see him. This prompts Jesus to recognize, at least to himself, that his *hour* has come. This in turn prompts Jesus to offer a parable about a grain of wheat. I say “parable” because it seems to me that Jesus is deliberately placing the image of the grain alongside of the coming of his hour. We therefore might hazard a thought that Jesus’ hour has to do with the fate of the seed put into the ground to die and to break ground with new life. Unless the grain dies—that is, unless Jesus dies, no new life will happen for him.

If there is any truth in this, what insights might we gain into the teaching that Jesus’ servants must follow him to where he is? Might it indicate that they too are to follow Jesus on this path that leads to death in the ground with the promise of new life? If this is possible then how do we interpret the warning about the seed that does not die?

Friends, can you feel the tension here? There is dramatic and spiritual tension from the moment when Jesus hears of the gentiles who have come to see him. What is so important about this event and why does Jesus sense that their arrival signals that his hour has come? What hour?

From this comes the tension about life and death. What does it mean to live? What does it mean to die? Is life simply biological existence? Is death simply the time when we stop breathing? Is there a dimension of life that is more than the beating of the heart and the expanding and contracting of the lungs? Is there a dimension of life that survives death?

For Jesus, this is a real and personal tension. After he has said these things, Jesus says, “now my soul is troubled.” The Greek word translated as troubled connotes agitation, inner conflict and distress—a painful division of desire. It is as if it is finally hitting Jesus that he *really* is heading to the cross. He really is facing the human agony of death. This is a foretaste of Jesus’ desperate pleading with God in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, let this cup pass from my lips.” *NOW...MY SOUL...IS TROUBLED.* Whatever bravado Jesus may have had on Palm Sunday is being stripped away. He asks, “...should I say, ‘Father save me from this hour? No. it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.’”

If we are looking for a resolution to the tension we are disappointed. For this last statement of Jesus leaves us again in a state of wondering. What reason has brought Jesus to this hour? What does this have to do with the news that some Greeks want to see Jesus?

Let us not pass over Jesus’ very real emotional and spiritual pain here. Let us not rush in with well-formed doctrines. Let us sit in silence with Jesus awhile and allow him to be in pain as he realizes that the path he has followed is committing him to sacrifice his mortal life.

I think of soldiers who throughout history enter the ranks of armies. They shine in their uniforms. They smile at us with pride and confidence that they are serving in a cause greater than themselves. Then comes the morning of battle. They know that this could very well be their last day on earth. How strongly might they wish to flee to the arms of their families! And yet they remain. *Why? Because it is for this reason they have come to this hour*—to face the enemy and protect their people at home. At that moment no one is thinking of personal glory. Very few are looking forward to some heavenly reward. They hear the voice of a higher calling.

There is a duty to be performed. No one is planning to escape. To do so would be to betray fellow soldiers. Would that we sitting here today could have a similar sense of purpose!

I cannot say for certain; but I feel strongly that Jesus at this moment is aware of the path he has been on from the beginning. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.... The world—that is the importance of the Greeks!* The whole human world! That is the reason! Jesus has been given by his Father to the world as gift to restore God to God's people. He cannot turn away from being the gift. And it is then that he says, "Father, glorify thy name." In other words, be seen in me for who you truly are. Amen.