

“Seeing is Believing”

John 12:20-33

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Lots of you know that currently two important members of our family are of the four-footed variety.

We have two boxers, Persephone, who is two and a half years old, and Finn who is 8 months old. Now if any of you know boxers, you know that they are sometimes referred to as the Peter Pan of dog breeds, they never grow up. That’s to say that the older one is no more calm or mature than the puppy—they both act like puppies. We have lots of toys that we leave in a toybox for the dogs, but they seem to like a particular toy best. The toy they like best is always the one that the other one has. They both could be playing with their own chew toy, but if they see that the other one is enjoying one, they will go and try to take it away. Erin and I laugh at them and shake our heads at how silly they are. But when I think about it, a couple of silly dogs are not all that different from people. I remember very strongly when I was a boy that my brother and I used to do the same thing. Whenever he had something that he was playing with or had something that I thought was interesting, I would think that he had something better than I did. That’s when I would always ask, “Can I see that?” And my brother would always do the most annoying thing, every time: he’d hold it up and say, “See?” That always made me mad. Because I didn’t want to “see” it, or look at it, I wanted to hold it. I wanted to take it myself and check it out and touch it, experience it by myself. That’s how I wanted to “see” it.

Our lesson today talks about two Greeks who come to see Jesus. These are probably Jewish believers who live elsewhere in the empire but are in Jerusalem for the Passover. They come to Philip—the apostle with the Greek name, and they say that they want to see Jesus. But do they really? They don’t come to Philip asking for information about Jesus. They don’t inquire about a new member’s class or ask to join a committee. They don’t request a statement of beliefs before joining. They simply want to see Jesus. To really see him, person to person, face to face.

Interestingly, they make this request on the way to a religious celebration: Passover. But even though they have probably grown up religious, right now they want to see Jesus. I have no idea if they were dissatisfied with the faith of their parents or if they were looking forward to another joyous Passover celebration but also intensely curious about all they'd heard about Jesus. And to be honest, I don't think it really matters. What they want just now is an encounter with, and experience of, Jesus.

The way John uses the word, "seeing," means more than observing. It's not like my brother holding up a toy and saying "see?" Coming to see Jesus means wanting to know Jesus, it means wanting to believe in Jesus. Coming to see Jesus means that they want more than just to know about Jesus. They want to know Jesus. And really that's what we are all about here, aren't we? Ultimately this is not a school to learn about Jesus. We don't gather here to find out more information about what the historical Jesus was like. When we have sermons, they are not primarily information. We're hopeful that we learn something here, that would be great—there's a reason that Presbyterians insist upon an educated clergy, so that we can have an educated laity. It's important for us to know about Jesus and about the Bible and about our faith. But that's not the goal. The goal is to know Jesus. I've quoted to you before from the Episcopal bishop Gene Robinson when he said that people come to our churches, synagogues and mosques, looking for God and we give them religion. We come here to experience God through worship, through fellowship with one another, and through service to the world. When those Greeks came to "see" Jesus, is that what they wanted, or did they just want to say hello?

John is not clear whether those people actually got to meet Jesus, but John is clear what it means to "see" Jesus, to know Jesus, to believe in Jesus, to follow Jesus. But what kind of Jesus do they get when they follow him? What kind of Jesus do we get?

"What John is very clear about, however, is the kind of Jesus they – and we – will see if we really look. Because upon hearing this request, Jesus immediately looks ahead to the cross. The hour he speaks about, the glory he prays for, the fulfillment of his mission and destiny he anticipates – all of this

revolves around his cross, his obedient embrace of sacrificial love to the point of death.

Which might tell us quite a bit about this Jesus: the point of faith in Jesus isn't just faith, or comfort, or satisfying spiritual desires. No, the point of following Jesus is that we might be drawn more deeply into the kingdom of God through our love for, service to, and sacrifice on behalf of those around us. Jesus comes to demonstrate God's strength through vulnerability, God's power through what appears weak in the eyes of the world, and God's justice through love, mercy and forgiveness. And he calls those who would follow him to the very same kind of life and love."¹

Many years ago a young man, not very religious even though he had faithful Christian parents, was kidnapped and taken as a slave. He was made to work tending animals and was often kept alone, or chained, and even without clothes so he wouldn't try to escape. After six years of this, the young man now 22 found that his only companion in this difficult, solitary life was the God that his parents worshiped, the person Jesus that they had taught him about when he was a boy. The young man eventually escaped and made his way back home, but he didn't stay there. He went and studied to become a priest, but he was haunted by his time in slavery. He eventually came to believe that he was taken captive so that he could learn about those people and go back to them and introduce them to Jesus, the Jesus who had meant so much to him in his captivity. Later he would write, *"If I have any worth, it is to live my life for God so as to teach these peoples; even though some of them still look down on me."* Of course, this is the legend of St. Patrick, who though he was born in England or Wales, spent the rest of his life in Ireland, the land where he was enslaved, in order to set the Irish free. He was called to those who had treated him badly, to those who could have been his enemies, to serve them in the name of Christ. Because that's what Christ does. This is the Christ we see. The one who would have us serve those we don't like and who don't like us. This is the Christ we believe. The one who would give his life and would have us give of ourselves to people we don't know and will never know. This is the Christ we follow, even to the cross.

1 Lose, David. "In the Meantime." March 16, 2015

Is this the Jesus the Greeks want to see? Is it the Jesus we want to see? I have no idea. But I do know that the Jesus who reveals the heart of our loving God by going to the cross is the Jesus we get, and the Jesus who is raised again on the third day to demonstrate that love is more powerful than hate and life more powerful than death is the Jesus we are called to follow. This is the one, in the end, who has promised to draw all of us to him.