

John 12: 20–32

"Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

In the gospel from John today, Jesus stands at the precipice of his ministry. We have watched and participated in his signs—healing, raising from the dead, He has achieved some fame and some notoriety riding into the city on the back of a donkey with palm branches spread before him. The crowd seems his. But the mood changes drastically and forever in this reading. Jesus proclaims that NOW is the moment. And he says: ‘those who love their life must lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.’ This is a strong message for us, it causes us to sit up straight and pay attention. This is a call to NOW. This is a call to servanthood that defines our Christianity.

She sat there in the hospital bed, straight as an arrow, her ever-present baseball cap covering her baldness. In between her waves of engulfing nausea, she talked about her concern for the patients in the hospital. She worried about the loneliness of the hospital room for those who were unable to move. Even as a patient fighting dehydration and unrelenting nausea, her thoughts were for her charges. Katherine worked as the head of patient relations in a hospital. Her fight with cancer only made her more determined to bring patient care to a new level. Her "job" was her ministry. Her side job was being the leader/pastor of the Unitarian Church. Jesus led her deeper into the ministry of palliative care, even as she was losing the fight for her own life. She taught those of us who work in pastoral care to reach deeper, to listen carefully, to take time, and to always, always pray for those who are in need. When Katherine entered a patient's room on her healthy days, light seemed to enter that space with her. Jesus was there. This was a few years ago, when we could be a pastoral visitor in the hospital, but I will never forget Katherine, bringing Jesus into the darkest of rooms, being his light as her time of transition came ever closer. Jesus was always there with her.

The gospel this morning catches us a little off guard. Jesus has just ridden a donkey into Jerusalem, and the crowds, excited by his arrival, intrigued by news of his miracles, amazed by his raising Lazarus from the dead, are spreading palms in front of him and are welcoming him like a king. People from all over are in Jerusalem, preparing to celebrate Passover. Fervor is running high and the Romans are more than nervous. Surely someone is selling t-shirts! Maybe there's one over there that says: "I survived the First Palm Sunday." Look, there's one that advertises " Passover AD 33." Perhaps I'd risk wearing the bright purple one that proclaims "Jesus Follower." Ah, but Palm Sunday—the full story is next week.

Our focus begins today with several Greek Jews who ask to see Jesus—and the mood of the story changes in an instant.

Jesus is no longer a side show. The signs are finished. The mood becomes intense. Jesus stands tall, young, strong and at the peak of his ministry. He tells his disciples—the hour has come. His disciples quiet themselves, the crowd fades into the background. John leaves the Greeks hanging, because they are no longer a part of this vignette. Jesus begins to hammer his point home. Now, he says. “Now is the judgment of this world, now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people

to myself." He tells them that now they must commit to this servant ministry that he has prepared them to do. He says to them: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in the world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

When we look at those words, they startle us with a different meaning from what we have heard Jesus say before. Today in the gospel, Jesus stands at the precipice. He has finished showing his followers and the crowds the many signs that point to his ministry and to the Messiah. He is now turning to face his time of Glory, the time for which he has been called. And He now turns the words around on us. We sit up and take notice when he says: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also." Wait, isn't it supposed to go like this--if you follow me, I will make your life better? Today he says we must follow him, if we are serving him. Follow him where? If we are serving him, aren't we already there?

I don't think so. I think Jesus expects us to go deeper. "Whoever serves me must follow me." We know where Jesus goes. In the gospels we watch him lead us into those uncomfortable places. He eats with sinners. He heals those lepers with open wounds all over them. He lifts up the beggars. He talks with those who are crazy, those who are public spectacles, those whom the general populace won't get near. He goes to the darkness of human life and brings light and healing and faith.

And he asks us to follow him. There. Into the uncomfortable places.

I am reminded of Mother Theresa when I read this passage. If I have a hero, she is it. She worked for decades in the most despicable, downtrodden, disease-ridden areas of India. She brought healing, hope, and cleanliness to thousands of forgotten people. In the caste system of India, these people were considered to be nothing. They were the ignorant, the forgotten, the hopelessly ill. And Mother Theresa followed Jesus there, where He was. Over the decades that she worked in Calcutta, pictures surfaced time and again in the media of Mother Theresa holding a dying child, feeding a starving man, kneeling by the bed of someone who was covered with open sores. And there was Jesus.

If you serve me, you must follow me. Where I am, there will my servant be also.

One of the mighty men of the 18th century was John Wesley. Some of us former Methodists claim him, but Wesley was a dedicated, devout Anglican priest. After an encounter with Christ, the walls of the church could not contain him. Wesley rode the length and breadth of Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland in the 1700's. In 52 years, his journals tell us that he rode about 225,000 miles and preached about 40,000 sermons. Where? In the comfort of those lovely old Anglican cathedrals? No, he preached to coal miners in the early morning hours. He went into cities and gathered crowds of a thousand homeless people outside the churches. He spoke to the poor, the laborers, the factory workers and the factory owners. He reached people wherever he could find them, because the church could not or would not reach them. He brought Christ and hope and light. He brought renewal and faith to thousands. He followed Christ into the uncomfortable English weather, into the awkward public places, into the dangerous and dark areas of the mines, onto the windy moors of wild Scotland. He served and he followed. Jesus was there.

We all do good works. Many of us serve at places that feed the homeless. We work with local schools, when they are open. We are all over this area, volunteering, doing, providing hope and relief for those in need. We contribute to so many important causes. We give whenever and whatever we can. We serve our church faithfully, and we find ways to serve our community. Jesus names us as his servants, and he calls us to follow him further. Where do

we find Jesus? Where do we find ourselves when we follow him?

I have found myself in the street, covering a sleeping man with a tarp. I have found myself listening to people who are lost, troubled, confused and without hope. I have found myself handing food to people who look hungry, trying to hear what their heart is saying. Where else might we find ourselves? As we work in our feeding stations, will we hear the stories of the people we serve? Will we be their listener, their consoler? Will we recognize a need that we can help fill? As we read the stories of our community, will we find ourselves drawn to the jails and the prisons? Will we follow Jesus to areas that are far from our comfort zones? As we look for ways to help in our schools as they begin to reopen, will we listen with our hearts in case our little charges find us their safe haven? Will we be brave enough to step out in their defense? Jesus calls us to follow him. He calls us to be uncomfortable. He call us to serve him in the darkness and in the difficult areas of the life around us. Jesus calls us to give up our life of comfort, to follow him.

But do we have to be in homeless shelters, prisons, and hospitals to be among those who are hurting? Jesus also calls us to be in the crowds of our daily life. He leads us into our own families, into our work places, into the marketplace around us. And just as surely as the prisoners need His words, so do those we meet every day. The people in work places throughout this city need us to listen to them, hearing their hearts behind their words. The lady in the store who holds up the line not only needs our patience, but perhaps our help as she fumbles for her coins. Our families need us to hear them. Our friends need us to be aware of their deepest needs. Jesus calls us once more into the uncomfortable places. He leads us to bring His word, His peace into our own intimate world. Sometimes that is the most difficult ministry of all. Jesus is there. As we prepare for this walk into Holy Week, beginning next week, let us keep in mind where we go when we follow Jesus. We walk the hill to Gethsemane with him. We carry the cross, we enter the darkness. We follow Jesus at cost, because there is no other way to live life. There is no other way to call ourselves Christians. There is no other way to say, Jesus is here.

I would leave us with the words of that precious hymn :

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea,
Day by day his clear voice soundeth saying, "Christian, follow me."
As of old, St. Andrew heard it by the Galilean lake,
Turned from home and toil and kindred, leaving all for his dear sake.
Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store;
From each idol that would keep us, saying, "Christian love me more."
In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
Still he calls, in cares and pleasures, "Christian, love me more than these."
Jesus calls us! By thy mercies, Savior may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience, serve and love thee best of all.