

Sermon Notes – March 21, 2021
(John 12:20-32)

I want to ask you to ponder a question this morning: If you knew that you were going to die anytime soon, what would you want your family to know? What would you want them to remember about you? What message would you give them?

When I was about twelve years old, my mother died with lung cancer. I'll never forget that my mother only knew she was dying about six weeks before she died. About two weeks before she died, she asked my Dad to bring me to the hospital. The only thing that I remember in my mother's conversation that day was, "Honey, you're old enough to know Jesus Christ as your Savior," and she told me how much her faith meant to her. That's what I remembered. She also had a conversation with my Dad. One of the things that she told him was, "Honey, I know you are going to want someone to spend your life with - you can't live by yourself. I want you to be able to marry again, but it better be somebody who is good with my kids or I will come back and haunt you." She told my third-oldest brother, who was the one always getting in trouble, "Howard, I want you to promise me two things: Number one, if your Daddy dies before Peggy and Ronnie are grown, promise me that you will see that they are taken care of and they are not adopted out. Secondly, Peggy likes to read, learn, and go to school. I want you to make sure that she goes to college for a year or two after High School." Now, this particular brother hadn't even finished High School, but she asked him to make all these promises to her. My mother had some distinct messages that she wanted us to remember.

When I was working with Odessa Whitmire's family this past week, preparing for the funeral service, there were two important things that Odessa had taught her family. If you were here at the service, I hope you caught those things. One was faith in God and how that faith had sustained her all her life. She had not had an easy life, but her faith in God had sustained her, and she taught her family about faith in God. The second thing she taught them was the importance and love of family - how important it was to have family - to be good to them; to take care of

them; to be there for them and love them. Over and over, that family kept saying, “She taught us how to have a loving family.” Those were important to her.

Today, some Greeks in the Gospel came to see Jesus in our lesson. We don’t know if they were Greek-speaking Jews or whether they were Greeks from Greece who were tourists at the Passover Feast. All we know is that some were probably believers and some were curiosity seekers, trying to find out all that was going on in the city of Jerusalem for Passover. Maybe they had heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, making the blind to see and the lame to walk. Maybe they had heard and they came out to check him out. But, it said they came to Jesus and they wanted to see him. Philip and Andrew went and told Jesus. (*Don’t you find it kind of interesting that we don’t know if he ever talked to them?*) But, we do know what his message was, and it was a message that he had for his disciples and us. He said, “If anyone wants to follow me, they’ll serve me. Whoever loves their life will lose it, but whoever hates their life in this world, will keep it for an eternity. If you want to follow me, serve me, and God will honor those that serve me.” What was Jesus saying? He was trying to give them what was weighing heavily on his heart and his mind. Jesus said to them (and showed them his humanity); “My soul is troubled. What do I do? Do I go back to God the Father and say, ‘Lord, save me from this hour’? ... No. I came for this purpose.” Jesus showed us his humanity. He was preoccupied with death. He was thinking about it. In a few days, he’s going to be crucified; his best friends are going to betray him; the religious leaders don’t even accept him; and he’s going to die. His mind is preoccupied about death. Wouldn’t you be if you only had three or four days left to live?

Jesus shows us his humanity. “But,” he said, “I have a greater purpose and that’s to die for the forgiveness of your sins. I’m going to be separated from my Father and I’m going to die for the sins of the world. But, I have a message that I want you to hear - If you want to live for me (follow me), you’ve got to serve me. You have to have a life of sacrifice, service, and humility. Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me.” What did Jesus mean when he said, “Deny Yourself?”

I like something that the late Dr. Fred Craddock (a retired Methodist Minister and professor at Emory University in Georgia) said. He said that one day he was speaking to a group of ministers about following Jesus and told them what he thought that meant. He looked at them and said, "Some of you want to go to the altar, lay down a thousand dollar bill, and claim that is the best of you. But, most of the time, following Jesus means taking that thousand dollars, going to the bank, exchanging it for quarters, and spending some here and there. Sometimes, you are going to go to a committee meeting that you don't want to go to. Sometimes, it means you are going to listen to the neighbor's kid's trouble, instead of telling them to, 'Get lost.' Sometimes, it means speaking to that shaky old man in the nursing home who looks like he has no family. He's lonely and you give him a smile and shake his hand. Sometimes, you are going to sacrifice your time and talents to do something that you don't want to do, and you feel you don't have time to do, just because it's what God would want you to do." He said, "If you are going to follow me, you are going to have to sacrifice yourselves sometimes - your time, your talents, your money. You're going to serve me every day." And it's a day-by-day, moment-by-moment choice you will have to make -- because sometimes we want to be selfish, don't we?

Have you ever noticed that a new infant is the center of your universe? You have to feed them, clothe them, change them, play with them, hold them, tend to them when they're sick, etc. They are the center of the universe. Some adults grow up thinking they are the center of the universe - everything is about what they think, what they feel, what they've done, what they've accomplished. Have you ever met any of those people? The world revolves around them. Jesus said, "That's not the way it is." Following him means learning to sacrifice some of our time, talents, energy, and money. So, if you want to follow him, it will involve service, sacrifice, humility, gratitude, and love.

I told you some Greeks came to see Jesus. We don't know if they ever got to meet him. But, I heard an interesting story about a man who almost missed seeing Jesus. His name was Charlie and he was in the hospital, dying. Anybody that knew Charlie, knew that he did not live a very good life -- he was mean to his wife and his kids; he mistreated them; he drank

too much. The nurses were surprised when he asked for a visit from the Chaplain at the hospital. They called the Chaplain in to see Charlie and the Chaplain asked, "Sir, what can I do for you?" He said, "I want you to pray for me." He asked, "What would you like me to tell God?" He said, "I want you to tell God that I'm sorry that I haven't lived the life that I should have. I'm sorry that my life turned out the way it did. I'm sorry that I mistreated my wife and kids. I really do love them." The Chaplain asked, "Is there anything else you would like me to tell him?" Charlie replied, "Yes. Tell God that I don't deserve anything that he can give me, but I want to live with him." The Chaplain prayed and Charlie asked Jesus to forgive him. That night Charlie died - he almost missed God.

You see, we don't know if the Greeks got to see Jesus, but that day, Jesus wanted everyone to know that when he's lifted on the cross, he would be there for everybody - Gentiles and Jews. And he left them a message (and us), "Listen, guys. It's most important that you know that I love you and I forgive you. That's why I'm going to that cross. If you want to follow me, it's going to be a life of service, sacrifice, humility, gratitude, and love. It's not going to be easy, but that's what I'm asking you to do."

So, today, I want to ask you: what message will you leave for your kids, your spouse? Is it about your love for them? Is it about your faith in God? And will they remember the example that you have left for them of following Jesus and living for him? Jesus had an important message and he gave it to them.

I want to end with a story from a movie called, "Cinderella Man" that came out in 2005. It starred Renée Zellweger and Russell Crowe, and it's based on the true story of the heavy-weight boxer, James Braddock during the Great Depression. In one scene in the movie, he broke his hand, and he had to come out of boxing for a while. He got back into boxing and he tried out to be a heavy-weight boxer. He went on to be the World Heavy-weight Champion, but in one scene in the movie, he's dealing with depression. Most people were living in poverty - including him and his family. One day, he got up to eat breakfast and he was hoping he'd go down to the docks that day and make a little bit of money. He got up to eat breakfast, and his wife laid him a piece of bologna on his plate. His little girl heard Daddy get up and she got up.

She said, “Mommy, I want to eat breakfast with Daddy too!” Mommy gave her a slice of bologna. The little girl said, “Mommy, can I have some milk?” James Braddock got up and he said, “I’ll go up and see if there’s any milk at the door.” He got up there and there were two empty jugs with a past due notice on the jugs. (Back then, they delivered milk to the door.) He went back downstairs and he said, “Honey, are you sure we don’t have any milk?” His wife said, “Yes, I’ve got about a third of a gallon of milk.” She poured the little girl some and her husband. She said, “I’ve got to keep enough for our two sons.” The little girl ate her bologna and the Dad said, “Honey, I’m going to the dock to try to find some work today – but I’ve got to fight tonight. Win or lose, I can get \$50.” She said, “Well, that will pay the electric bill and the water bill.” He said, “But, if I win, I will make \$75!” She said, “That will give us money for groceries!” The little girl said, “Daddy, I need some more milk. Can I have some more milk?” Mom said, “Honey, I can’t let you have anymore. We’ve got to share with your brothers.” Dad looked at his wife, looked at his little girl, took his bologna, and put it on the little girl’s plate. Then he poured his milk into her glass. His wife said, “Honey, you need that food if you’re going to work all day and then fight tonight.” He said, “You know, honey, I was just dreaming last night that I went to Ritz Carlton with Mickey Rooney and we had steak, baked potatoes, and I ate ice cream three times last night. I’m so full that I can’t eat anymore.” He looked at his little girl and smiled. His wife kept saying, “Honey, you need that food. Please.” He said, “No, I’m okay.” He got up to walk out the door. Why? We will sacrifice for our kids, won’t we? He looked at his little girl, gave her his bologna and his milk, because parents will sacrifice for their children. Why? ... because you love them. And that’s what Jesus did for you and me. He sacrificed his life because he loved us.

I hope as we go through this Lenten season, you will think deeply about the message that Christ gave to us, how much he loves you and me, and how he’s called us to follow him on a daily basis. What message will you leave your family? What will I leave to mine when I die? Amen.