

John 12:20-33

The Greeks came to the apostles and said, “We want to see Jesus.” Who here doesn’t want to see Jesus? But are we looking for him in a future context, or are we looking for him here among us? Isn’t that why we come to church, to find Jesus? It’s the reason behind all the other reasons we’re here too —, serving on council, making quilts, singing in the choir, leading the liturgy, or just sitting in the pew. We’re like those Greek gentiles who show up in this story. We want to see Jesus.

In today’s gospel lesson from John Jesus and his disciples have made their way to Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, for the celebration of the Passover. They’re with what is probably a big crowd of people, mostly Jews, who have arrived from across the known world. Among the crowd is a group of Greek gentiles who, because they find Judaism interesting, have come to Jerusalem to study it and maybe even participate in this high, holy celebration, thinking of it more as a party than a religious festival.

They hear some talk about a man named Jesus who some people think may be the long-awaited messiah and they track down one of his followers who hails from Galilee and speaks Greek. A man named Philip. By John’s account, they skip the small talk and get right to the point: “Sir, we want to see Jesus.” Philip, not knowing what to say, goes to get Andrew and the two of them go and tell Jesus about the Greeks who want to see him.

And now the Greek gentiles and their request are all but forgotten as Jesus launches into a long soliloquy about his impending death. The news that his word has made it beyond the Jewish community and into the secular world signals that his ministry is now coming to an end. He has accomplished what he came to do. His gradual movement toward Calvary will now become a fast-paced move to the cross, which will be the exclamation point at the end of his life. Unlike in the synoptic gospels, where he asks to be spared the ordeal of crucifixion and the protracted pain and humiliation of death by torture, his concern, here, is only that God will somehow, through him, be glorified. God assures him that this will, indeed, be the case. God will be glorified.

The quest of the Greeks in this reading continues today. People — believers and unbelievers — still want to see Jesus. But, when they seek him, what do they see?

They see the pope advising Ukraine to surrender to Russia who attacked them and continues this unjust war. They see, during the Super Bowl, a 60-second ad depicting a series of images of one person washing another person’s feet, with each pairing seeming unlikely. An oil rig worker washes the feet of a climate activist. A cop washes the feet of a young Black man. An older woman washes the feet of a young woman outside an apparent abortion clinic while abortion protesters look on. A priest washes the feet of a young gay man. As the commercial ends, words appear on the screen: “Jesus didn’t teach hate. He washed feet.” It’s an ad from a group called He Gets Us, which is running a multimillion-dollar ad campaign with the aim of essentially reintroducing America to Jesus or Jesus to America. But they managed to annoy or even anger just about everyone across the Christian spectrum.

They see people posing the entirely fair question of whether it’s appropriate for Christians to spend millions of dollars on an ad campaign when it could be spent instead on, for instance, providing food or shelter to those in need. And they wonder whether

feeding the hungry and housing the homeless wouldn't be a better reflection of Jesus than any clever TV advertisement.

And they see some people criticizing He Gets Us, the funders (which include a founder of Hobby Lobby), noting that they've also funded conservative Christian legal causes, it's even been accused of being "a front for Christian nationalism." (Christians United for Separation of Church and State) It isn't just liberals and progressive Christians who are questioning the ad. The most radically right-wing Christians were furious and still are. The Daily Wire's Matt Walsh called the ads "heretical," saying that Jesus doesn't take care of those who haven't repented. Fighting. Bickering. Name calling. Accusations. Condemnations. This is what those looking for Jesus see when what they want and need to see is Jesus.

Toward the end of his life, John Wesley commissioned Thomas Coke to go to America and ordain Francis Asbury and others into the ministry. It is said that, as he stood at the pier bidding Coke farewell, he offered only this one directive: "Offer them Christ, Thomas...offer them Christ." Out of those three words would grow a church that would eventually become the second largest protestant denomination in the world. And now, like most of the other old-line protestant churches, it is shrinking. How is this possible? Why are our churches shrinking?

Boil down the results of the poll takers and book writers and you learn it is because the people aren't seeing the Jesus they think they should be seeing reflected in the people of the churches. They want to see Jesus and they aren't seeing him in most of the Christian churches. They aren't finding the Jesus they were taught about in Sunday school and they can't find the Jesus they see when they read the gospels. They want, indeed, they are hoping and praying, to see the Jesus who is forgiving, accepting, healing, supportive, loving, kind, gentle, and self-sacrificing. They want to see the Jesus whose arms are open and whose love is unconditional. They want to see the Jesus who says, "let the little children come to me," and "as you do it to the least of these...you do it to me." And those who haven't given up and stopped seeking, are seeking desperately to find that Jesus reflected in his resurrected body, the church.

This is the Jesus whom I see. The Jesus who tells us to take the log out of our own eye before we judge the weaknesses of others. The one who told the people gathered around the woman accused of adultery to throw the first stone if they have never sinned. The Jesus who loves people not because they are perfect, but because they are created by God who is perfectly holy; God who loves them so much that he sent Jesus to take away the sin of the world.

Is this who we are here at Immanuel? I'd think so. I think that we love others because God first loved us. I think that we are the ones who, when someone comes to us asking to see Jesus, that we will shower them with God's unconditional love.

May God grant us the will and the strength to lovingly reflect in all that we are and do, the image of God's son, Jesus Christ, whom we call Lord.
All glory be to God.