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The Gospel of John
XXXVIII. The Strange Glory of God
John 12:27-36

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I find it comforting that, as the hour of His death on the cross approached, Jesus would pray to the Father, *“Now is my soul troubled.”* Of course, we cannot know exactly what was troubling His soul in that hour – and His very next word indicates that He was by no means shrinking away from His appointed work. But I find it comforting to know that Jesus knew what it is to have His soul troubled within Him. Because it is the promise that when my own soul is troubled and I come to Him in some hour of desperate need, He understands what I am feeling. For He now knows, in His inmost Being, what it is to feel what we all feel. Such that when we pray to Him from out of the depths of our own troubles, we are praying to One who can sympathize from out of the depths of His own human experience on this earth. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses . . .”*¹

Jesus then ends His prayer with the request, *“Father, glorify your name.”* That is probably how we should end all our prayers, right before we say “Amen.” Having laid before Him all the troubles and all the joys of our hearts then to say, *“Father, in all of these things, glorify your name.”* I think Jesus would approve, since the way He ends His prayer – *“Father, glorify your name”* – is the same as how He taught His to begin our prayer – *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”*² *“Father, glorify your name.”*

And as Jesus finishes His prayer, the Father audibly answers Jesus’ petition: *“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”* The crowd standing by described hearing a sound like thunder. A few even interpreted the sound as the voice of an angel speaking to Jesus. But much like the thunder echoing down from Mt. Sinai when Moses met with God³, it was the thunder of the voice of God answering the prayer of His Son, confirming Him in His work, perhaps even strengthening Him for what was to come. Jesus, though, turns to the crowd and tells them that the sound, the voice of God, was given for their sake, not His. Meaning, I think, that while they could not understand just yet any of this or any of what was about to come – very soon, on the other side of the cross and the resurrection, all would become clear. They would remember the voice of God confirming that the cross was indeed the will of God for their salvation.

“Father, glorify your name.” “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” Glory, glorify. As we did last Sunday, it is again worth thinking about what those words mean to us – and how differently they mean to God. To us, glory suggests scaling the heights of achievement, success, fame and fortune. Glory is Edmund Hillary conquering Everest, Alexander the Great conquering the known world. It is Ronald Acuna conquering the laws of physics with that cannon

of a right arm as he erases yet another foolish base runner. It is Michael Jordan the way he used to defy gravity and hang forever in mid-air before slamming the ball through the hoop. Glory, glorify – to us it is all about greatness and acclaim, reaching the top and raising our hands in triumph over all that lies conquered beneath us.

But the glory of God, as it is revealed to us in Jesus, is so very different from that. *“I have glorified it,”* answers the Father – referring to the coming down of the Son to earth in the humble form of a human infant, born in a backwater little village in a forgotten corner of the Roman Empire: *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”*⁴ The glory of God not as God coming down with a heavenly host, a heavenly army – to conquer, to destroy, to run roughshod over us in order to break our rebellion. But rather God coming down in utter weakness and humility – having abandoned His heavenly throne, set aside His divine crown, taking upon Himself the limitations and frustration of our life in this world. And all in order to show love to us, not power – all in order to woo us back into His embrace, not terrorize us into obedience.

“And I will glorify it again” – meaning that hour which has brought the Son of Man to His troubled prayer, that approaching hour of the cross. *“And I will glorify it again”* – upon the cross of Jesus. *“And I will glorify it again”* – the arrest in the Garden, the beatings by the soldiers, the mockery of the two trials, the burden of carrying the cross through the streets while the crowds jeer at Him. The nails driven into His hands and feet, the hunger and thirst and agony of such a humiliating, excruciating death – not to mention that all the while He was carrying the additional and immeasurable burden of our sins, dying the death that should have been ours. *“And I will glorify it again”* – the cross of Jesus Christ, that is the glory of God. The strange glory of God – so different from the way we define glory, so different from the way we seek a glory of our own.

So perhaps, as we gaze upon the cross, and that strange glory of our God – perhaps one small thing we are being invited to do is to change our definition of glory. Change it from our false definition to His strange definition. To learn from Him that true glory lies not in great conquest so much as in humble sacrifice. To seek glory not at the expense of others, but through service to others. To perceive glory – true glory – not in terms of conquest, achievement, power – but in terms of quiet daily offerings of sacrificial love. Glory as something quiet, gentle, and giving – as opposed to something loud, grasping, and selfish.

Paul certainly saw the cross as teaching us this. Writing to the Philippians, he describes the strange glory of God as inviting us to possess the same mind in us as Jesus manifested in His life and death on earth. This is Eugene Peterson’s translation from The Message, Philippians chapter two:

*Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became **human**! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless,*

obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

*Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever . . .*⁵

The strange glory of God. Last Sunday, I closed worship with a quote from an early church teacher named Irenaeus: *“The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”* But what does a human being fully alive look like? *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”*⁶ The true glory of a human life is found when that life mirrors the glory of God we see in Jesus, not the false glory lifted up by the world around us. It is, in the words of Richard Foster, who I also quoted last week, to become . . .

*. . . free to live our lives quietly and profoundly. We are at ease in our hiddenness. We have no need for attention because we have learned to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value . . . To be important from a kingdom perspective we do not have to be the biggest, the best, or the most innovative. We simply do our work faithfully with all our might and we leave the rest in the hands of God.*⁷

“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again,” says the Father in answer to Jesus’ prayer. And then Jesus turns to those around Him and says to them, *“This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”* Remember last week when those Greeks came wanting to see Jesus⁸ – well here is Jesus’ real answer to their request: *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”* Jews and Gentiles alike, all people. The Greeks will meet Jesus upon the cross, as He draws all people to Himself.

This is now the third time Jesus has spoken of being lifted up – though no one knew He meant His cross until after the cross had happened. The first time was when He was speaking with Nicodemus: *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*⁹ In the wilderness, the Israelites were plagued by deadly snakes. God told Moses to put the image of a snake upon a pole and lift it up in the midst of the camp – and if anyone were to be bitten, they could look up upon that image and their life would be saved.¹⁰ *“And I, when I am lifted up,”* says Jesus – meaning that all we must do if we would live and not die is to look upon Jesus lifted high upon His cross. And believe, trust, and bow down before His sacrifice for our sake.

*Upon the cross of Jesus
 Mine eyes at times can see
 The very dying form of one
 Who suffered there for me;
 And from my smitten heart with tears
 Two wonders I confess:
 The wonders of redeeming love,
 And my unworthiness.*¹¹

We look to Jesus lifted up upon His cross set in the midst of this world – and we are saved from death.

“And I, when I am lifted up . . .” The second time Jesus spoke of being lifted up was during a dispute with the Pharisees. They were calling into question His identity and mission, claiming Him to be nothing more than a charlatan and a blasphemer. Jesus answered them: *“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.”*¹² We look upon Jesus lifted up upon His cross and we see precisely what the Father would teach us, His wayward and rebellious children: which is that, in spite of our sin, we are loved by Him – loved beyond measure. We see that Jesus lifted up upon His cross is nothing less than the very heart of God towards us, made plain to us. The great truth, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, that *“in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”*¹³ Or, as Jesus put it, long before He was lifted up in proof of that truth: *“For God so loved the world.”*¹⁴ We look upon His cross and we see how much we mean to the God who made us, how precious we are in His sight regardless of what our life on earth has been.

“And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.” Jesus, lifted up upon His cross, is the greatest magnet the world has ever known. Drawing to Himself our wayward and wounded hearts, like iron filings to a magnetic rod. *“Will draw”* – not compel, not force, but draw, invite, attract us into His grace. Because He wants us to come to Him freely and fully out of an answering love in response to His sacrificial love:

*Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*¹⁵

*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me.*¹⁶

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” All people will be drawn to Him, drawn to the glory of His cross, drawn by the grace that flows freely forth from there, drawn by the love of God for us made manifest there. That doesn’t necessarily mean that all will accept the invitation – though let us work and pray in His name that it should be so. But it does mean all are drawn, all are invited, all are precious in His sight. The cross is the great magnet of divine love, drawing us home, drawing us into His embrace, drawing us to the One whose love just will not let us go.

“Will draw all people” – which means not just us, but truly all people. All of us, inclusively and together, are being drawn to Him. Which has the inevitable meaning that as He draws all people closer to Himself in love, He is at the same time drawing all of us people closer to one another by His love. For it is not by accident that He gave us two, not one, but two great commandments. Not just that we should love God, but that we should love our neighbor also.¹⁷ All our neighbors, near and far. All people. His cross is not just the instrument by which our

separation from God is overcome, but also the means by which our separation from one another is overcome.

For He is lifted up that all might be made right again, that all manner of broken things shall be made whole again – including our relationships with our fellow human beings. This is the brokenness and sin from which He has come to save us – not just that we turn our backs upon Him, but that we turn our backs upon our fellow human beings. Jesus wants to draw **all** people to Himself – all while we, in sin, keep trying to draw boundary lines to separate us from others. Separating tribe from tribe, nation from nation, my party from your party, my kind from your kind. Jesus treats us each one as His beloved, but we treat certain others – meaning those ones who are “them” as opposed to “us” – we treat others with suspicion, jealousy, fear, hostility, prejudice and hatred. But the glory of God, the cross of Jesus Christ, strips away every boundary line we would draw, every distinction we would try to preserve between us who deserve His love and them that in our opinion don’t. The lines we draw, the boundaries we defend, the divisions we think are to be set in stone – all, in the end, are to be erased by a love big enough to enfold us all in, to make us all one in Him. *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”* Which means, whether we like it or not, that we will be drawn into closer communion with all other peoples even as we are being drawn closer to Him.

Dorotheos of Gaza, another early church teacher, pictures this as a wagon wheel. Look at the picture on the cover of your bulletin insert, and the quotation below. The cross of Christ at the center of all of life. And, around the periphery, all the children of humankind. All. *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”* Trace a path for yourself from the periphery of that wheel to His cross at the center – and see that great truth of what Jesus has done, is doing. For the closer we draw to the love of God in the cross of Jesus Christ, the closer we become to one another – like the converging spokes of that wheel. And, conversely, the more in love we are drawn towards our neighbor, the closer we come to the love of God expressed in the cross of Jesus our Savior. He comes to make us one with Himself – but also one, once again and forever, with one another. *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”*

“Father, glorify your name,” prays Jesus. *“Father, glorify your name in and through us also,”* may our prayer be. And so let us walk in the light, in the path, in the love which is that glory, that strange glory, we behold in the cross of our Savior.

¹ Hebrews 4:15.

² Matthew 6:9.

³ Exodus 19:16-20.

⁴ John 1:14

⁵ Philippians 2:5-9, as translated in Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2138.

⁶ Philippians 2:5.

⁷ Source unknown.

⁸ John 12:20-26.

⁹ John 3:14-15.

¹⁰ Numbers 21:4-9.

¹¹ Elizabeth, Cecilia Douglas Clephane, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus."

¹² John 8:28.

¹³ II Corinthians 5:19.

¹⁴ John 3:16.

¹⁵ Matthew 11:28-29.

¹⁶ Revelation 3:20.

¹⁷ Matthew 22:35-40.