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The Gospel of John
XXXVII. The Glory of the Son of Man
John 12:20-26

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The triumphal entry of Palm Sunday is over and the Passover celebration in Jerusalem is underway. And, in a quiet moment, some Greeks, having heard about Jesus, approach Philip and ask if they could meet Him: *"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."* But when Philip and Andrew go to Jesus to present the request of the Greeks – a request they probably assumed Jesus would welcome – they are met by a rejection. Actually, Jesus' answer must have seemed to them, as it does to us – like something from out of left field! We expect Him to say, *"That's great, bring them to me!"* Or, at worse, to say, *"Now is not a good time."* Instead what Jesus says is this: *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."* The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified – in what way is that in any way an answer to the request of the Greeks? *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."*

Well, as it will turn out – and as we will see more clearly in next Sunday's reading – that is indeed not only a direct answer to the request of the Greeks, but also the best possible answer the Greeks could ever have hoped to receive from Jesus. But, again, we won't really see how that is so until next Sunday. So, then, what does this strange answer say to us on this Sunday? *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."* Turns out that answer is the best of all possible answers Jesus can speak to us this morning.

The reference, as we know, is to the Cross. The hour is now come, is now close at hand, when Jesus our Savior will go to His death upon the cross for the sake of our salvation. *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."* Glorified. Glorified – Jesus is speaking of His death upon the cross when He says that – glorified. Death on a cross was the most shameful, inglorious of all the forms of capital punishment in that day – reserved for only the worst of the worst offenders. Glorified? Stripped, beaten, whipped, a cross of thorns on His head and a mocking placard over His head – glorified? Forsaken, abandoned, spat upon and cursed at – all by the very crowd who had just welcomed Him with palm branches and hosannas – glorified? *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."* How can this be the glory of the Son of Man – to be "despised and rejected by men, as one from whom men hide their faces and esteem him not," as the prophet Isaiah says?[1]

Glorified because upon His cross, He fulfills the great mission the Father sent Him to accomplish – our salvation. Because upon His cross, He shows forth to us, even in and through His agony, the height and depth and breadth of the love of God for sinners such as you and me.[2]

Glorified, because upon His cross He yields up His life so that we – the very ones who deserve to die – He yields up His life so that may not lose ours:

What thou, my Lord, hast suffered
Was all for sinners' gain:
Mine, mine was the transgression,
But thine the deadly pain.[3]

The Cross **is** the glory of the Son of Man. Because upon His cross – His offering of sacrificial love, His life poured out for our sake – because by His death upon the cross, we now live. Our lives are now redeemed and made new. *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."*

And that is the meaning of the words which follow: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."* N. T. Wright, the brilliant British biblical scholar, tells of playing the game of conkers with his childhood buddies. "Conker" was the name given to the seed of a horse chestnut tree. The prickly, green outer shell is removed to reveal the dark brown chestnut within – the conker – sometimes over an inch in diameter. The boys would drill a hole through the center of the chestnut, run a piece of knotted string through the hole, and then the battle of conkers would begin. Two boys would swing the conkers on their strings until the conkers would collide, and repeat over and over until one of the conkers would be smashed to pieces by the other. The winning conker survived this Darwinian duel to fight another match. Sounds less like a game and more like a description of world history to me.

But, one day, he says – and only once on this one day – he says that he decided to do with a conker what nature, what God, had always intended them for. He took one of his best ones, extra large and shiny, and instead of taking it to school for the day's battles, he planted it in the ground. Dug a hole, put in some sand and water, stuffed it down as far as it would go. He says it seemed a shame at the time to let such a perfect conker go to such waste. But next spring, there was a shoot rising from the ground. The year after, a small sapling. Now there stands a tree providing fresh horse chestnuts of its own.[4] *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."*

You get the picture. Jesus dead upon His cross and buried in the tomb is the seed planted in the earth. And what springs forth from that seed of His death planted in the earth is new life for us all. What springs forth in resurrection splendor from His sacrificial death is nothing less than the fruit of new life, abundant life, eternal life for you and for me and for all sinners saved by His gift of sacrificial love.

John and I were talking on Wednesday about this theme of new life, abundant life, eternal life – how it runs all through John's Gospel. So much so that we can describe the theme of John's Gospel using only two words – love and life. The love of God, expressed in the life and death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – that love which, in turn, brings us life. Enables us to live as those forgiven and cleansed of the past. To live better, even abundantly, in the present. And, when the time comes, to live forever together in the Kingdom Jesus is preparing for us. This

theme sounded in the very opening paragraph: *"In him was life, and the life was the light of men."*[5] And we have heard this theme of His love bringing us into new life again and again.

Think of His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well – this woman the very depiction of life having run dry: rejected, abandoned, excluded. And Jesus saying to her, saying to us: *"Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." "Sir, give me this water,"* she exclaims – already with something of this new life welling up within her.[6] Or think of the day after Jesus had fed the five thousand by the Sea of Galilee with just five loaves and two fish. Jesus turning to the crowd in the aftermath of that miracle and saying to them, *"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger; and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*[7] New life in us, born of His love for us.

Or how about the story He told about a good shepherd, the kind of shepherd who would do anything, sacrifice everything for the well-being of His flock. Jesus saying to the disciples and to us, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."*[8] And, above all else, think of Lazarus raised from the dead. Jesus saying to Martha beforehand, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."*[9]

New life in us, born of His love for us. His love, His sacrificial love for us, His death upon the cross for the love of us – that is the seed planted in the earth, the glory of the Son of Man. His death is the seed planted in the soil of this world and in the soil of our own hearts. And you and I are resurrected into new life, abundant life, eternal life – we are the fruit which comes forth from that seed. Life and love. His life offered up for us upon the cross, out of His great love for us, bringing us new life and abundant life and eternal life, now and forever – this is the glory of the Son of Man.

Which then is the foundation for the invitation which then follows: *"Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."* I know that doesn't sound like an invitation – our sinful ears are more likely to hear it as something more akin to a threat. But let us hear these words in light of what Jesus has just said – and in light of what Jesus, at that moment, is just about to go forth to do. For these words are nothing less than His invitation to us to enter into this new and abundant and eternal way of living that He opens up to us through His death on the cross.

He is saying to us that if we want to hold on to life the way we are presently living it, then fine – but it will not only keep us unfulfilled and disordered and anxious in the present, but will slip through our fingers in the end. On the other hand, He says, if we are willing to let go of that old life in order to take hold of Him and of all that He has done for us and promises to do for us – then we will indeed receive, even now and already, the new life and abundant life and eternal life He has won for us. This new and abundant and eternal life in us at first like a small shoot poking out from the earth, but soon becoming a sapling rising up toward the sun, and then at last a mighty tree planted by the very River of Life.[10] His invitation to us to have that life which His death has won for us.

It is the same invitation He issued to the Samaritan woman at the well – new life in exchange for the old, abundant life in exchange for unsatisfying life, eternal life in exchange for life that ends in the grave. The same invitation He extended to the crowd by the Sea of Galilee. The same invitation He extended to Mary and Martha and Lazarus – especially to Lazarus whose life was already lost and gone. And yet, the invitation of Christ: *"Lazarus, come out of that tomb!"*[11] For whoever loves his or her life as it is apart from Christ's invitation will only lose that life and everything about that life to the tomb. But whoever is willing to turn away from the life he or she is living now, in order to embrace the new and abundant and eternal life Christ is offering to us, that person will keep his or her life and enjoy it, find a depth of richness and satisfaction in it never known before, and then keep that life forevermore. Not a threat, but an invitation, an encouragement, not to miss out on the fruit of His sacrificial love – which is life, new life for us.

How do we accept this invitation? The next verse: *"If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also."* We follow Him. We learn deeply and seek to implement daily the life instructions and priorities He graciously grants to us through His Word. And we seek to serve Him. We seek to be where He is. Or, to say it in another way He gave to us: we accept His invitation into new and abundant and eternal life by *"seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to us."*[12] To follow Jesus is to intend, each day, to seek Him above all else and through all else and in all else. It is to make living with Him and for Him and through Him the focus – the chief and central focus – of our lives.

Or here is another way to think about it – it is to pray, each day, the prayer of the psalmist. Last Sunday, during the reading of our responsive psalm, a verse just leapt out and grabbed me by the shoulders: *"Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth."*[13] Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. That sounds an awful lot like *"Seek first the kingdom of God,"* sounds an awful lot like hating the old life in order to receive the new.

But the verse that really caught me up was the one that follows: *"Unite my heart to fear your name."* Unite my heart to fear your name. I heard that and I've not been able to get it out of my head all week – *"Unite my heart to fear your name."* My heart is so divided so much of the time – trying to multitask this life instead of focusing in on the one thing, the One True God, in whom alone all things find their purpose and their fulfillment. *"Unite my heart"* – my scattered, divided, disordered heart – *"to fear your name."*

Then, on Tuesday morning, I was reading an interview with Richard Foster, whose classic work, The Celebration of Discipline has had an immense impact on my faith over the forty-some years since it was published. And Foster said the very same thing as the Psalmist! He was asked what he thought the greatest obstacle facing the church today might be. He began by citing the opening verse from that book, in which he named superficiality as the great obstacle in that day. And then he said if he were writing today he would add a second obstacle – distraction. He then quoted Psalm 46 – *"Be still and know that I am God"* – pointing out how, these days, we are so distracted that such stillness seems a distant dream for most of us.[14] And as I was reading that, all I could hear echoing in my brain was the plea of the Psalmist: *"Unite my heart to fear your name."* Unite my heart to fear your name. *"Be still and know that I am God."* Draw me away from all that distracts and divides me from you, O Lord. Unite my heart around the one thing, the one

purpose, the one most essential ingredient for life new and abundant and everlasting. *"Unite my heart to fear your name."*

And that's what Jesus is telling us, inviting us toward, when He talks about hating our old life in order to open ourselves up to the new life He would give to us. He is inviting us to focus upon Him every day, in all our ways, each and every day – so that He might leads us into this new life, abundant life, eternal life He has opened up for us by His death of the cross. So that His sacrifice upon the cross might indeed bear fruit in us – that glorious fruit of new life in us. And so, in response to His love – with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and insofar as we are able: *"Unite my heart to fear your name."* For so the glory of the Son of Man is planted in us. For so the glory of the Son of Man will bear much fruit in our lives, now and forevermore. The glory of the Son of Man – His sacrificial death that we might have life.

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[1] Isaiah 53:3.
[2] See Ephesians 3:14-19.
[3] Lines from the second verse of "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," hymn number 221 in our Glory to God hymnal.
[4] N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 28.
[5] John 1:4.
[6] John 4:13-15.
[7] John 6:35.
[8] John 10:11.
[9] John 11:25-26.
[10] Psalm 1:3; Revelation 22:1-2.
[11] John 11:43.
[12] Matthew 6:33.
[13] Psalm 86:11.
[14] Rich Villodas, "A Conversation with Richard Foster," Leadership Journal, Vol. XXXVIII (2025), p. 38.