

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Gospel Year B

Lift High the Loss

John 12:20-33

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Matt Metevelis

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 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. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 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 said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

DIAGNOSIS: Chasing Glory



Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): A Glut of Glory

The on-ramp for “glory” has gotten much wider. We formerly thought of glory as the domain of an elite few. If you were to seek out who has achieved the most “glory” in society you might respond with the name of a winning athlete, an award-winning actor, a successful politician, or a visionary innovator. But with the advent of a digital age in which we are connected to one another both intimately and exponentially, it’s much easier to sit in the public eye for doing less. I don’t want to bother to look this up but my guess is that Tom Brady hoisting the Lombardi trophy in Tampa got fewer retweets than a guy skateboarding, drinking Ocean Spray, and lip-syncing Fleetwood Mac. Glory for our culture is coming to mean fewer things like actual achievements and more like getting noticed in the way you

express yourself. The result is a world that has gotten louder instead of better. People will increasingly think of themselves in ways that formerly were only in the parlance of celebrities in places like Los Angeles. “Exposure” and “branding” have become fixtures in everyone’s vocabulary. So many of our neighbors are seeking ways to lift themselves up.

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem) Glory and Survival

While it’s easy to blame culture and technology, this state of affairs is nothing new. Our evolutionary past testifies to the utility of “glory-seeking” behavior. People who get noticed and admired are more likely to get better resources, attract more mating partners, and take risks that might yield beneficial results and influence others to join them in doing so. When we are ignored, overlooked, or exiled by the tribe we might experience isolation and danger. It doesn’t matter if anonymous bipeds get eaten. To survive we need to be noticed. For this reason, deep in our brains both individually and socially, we connect glory and success. Glory represents the award of effort. Whether you win the Super Bowl or post a video with a certain threshold of “hits,” glory comes at the end as a reward. We attempt to lift ourselves up and assure ourselves that people love us, that we are accepted and valued, and that our life “means” something. Glory in our culture has become synonymous with “ultimate achievement.”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Glory and the Law

“The thrill of glory, the agony of defeat.” You’ll usually hear this pasted on a video montage with soaring music when you’re getting ready to watch a sporting event. This cliché discloses to us what kind of “theology of glory” is embedded in our culture. Glory is winning. Glory is having the best game plan. It’s having the best execution. It’s keeping “momentum.” It’s

making plays. It's having more grit. Glory is the reward of playing right. Our culture has no better image of "glory" than a team hoisting a trophy over their heads with confetti flying and giant grins on their faces.

Those theologically astute will listen and hear the language of the law. Glory for a sports team is the prize for keeping the law. It's the prize for us too. Look at your social media page and scroll down your feed. It will have plenty of glory. The glory of a good vacation. The glory of a magical afternoon with smiling kids. The glory of a finely crafted and cooked meal. The glory of a hilarious meme that you found first. All of these things are the fruit of your keeping the law as a hard worker, a great parent, an aspiring amateur chef, and your finely-honed sense of both pop culture and wit. The law takes "glory" and translates it as "reward." Glory is just the state of doing the right things. Indeed so right that people will remember you and talk about you after you die. Glory is lifting up a trophy because you won. It's earned and never given. In fact, there is no mention of a "giver"—much to our judgment.

(Critical aside: Most preaching about Jesus stops right here. The glory of Jesus is a reward for doing the right things, making the right decisions, or being like him.)

PROGNOSIS: The Cost of Glory



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): “Gotta Get Your Scars”

Good celebrity interviewers try to make their guests seem more human by persuading them to talk about their failures. On an episode of his podcast, Conan O’Brian did this with Bryan Cranston who had a very circuitous career in acting before becoming a star on “Malcolm in the Middle” and striking gold with “Breaking Bad.” During the conversation, Cranston talked about his struggles with humor and grace. “Gotta get your scars, man.” This is how a success-based culture treats failure. It’s only bad when it doesn’t shape you and lead you into bigger success by teaching you lessons and giving you character and relatability.

Jesus reaches the end of his public ministry with nothing but a string of successes. He has made new wine flow from empty

asks, he's cured diseases, fed multitudes, made the lame walk, given the blind their sight, and even raised the dead. It's an impressive resume. As he comes to Jerusalem with much fanfare he stops and says, "Okay, now it's time to fail." His hour has come. And it is precisely in the failure that is about to happen that "the Son of Man is about to be glorified." Jesus has succeeded and come to the end of his work not to get a reward but to "get his scars." We think of our failures as our beginnings. But Jesus, in obedience to his father's will, experiences his ultimate success in what looks exactly like failure. Jesus turns upside down the idea of glory and failure being opposites. His glory is in his failure. The cross unites human failure and divine glory. The shame of the cross is how Christ is glorified.

The "good news" proclaimed to us in this passage is contained in what "glory" means in the context of this passage. Jesus speaks in response to certain Greek proselytes who had come to the Passover festival and asked Philip to "see Jesus." It was Philip who fittingly told Nathanael about Jesus by inviting him to "come and see" way back in chapter one. When Jesus hears that those born as Gentiles are looking for him, this provokes him to declare that the "hour has come" for him "to be glorified."

Isaiah 49 may be invoked here:

*You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified ...
It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors
of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth (vv. 3,
6.)*

The "glory" of God relates not to God's innate attractiveness, desirability, accomplishment, or victory. The "glory" of God is God revealing Godself. The revelation here goes beyond Israel and to the nations. It's not realized in the completion of a legal contract, or in Jesus taking his place on David's throne.

Christ's glory—God's revealing—happens in the cross in suffering, consoling, forgiving, and dying. And it is precisely in failure, shame, humiliation, and death itself where Jesus "draws" people to himself. Jesus doesn't lift up a trophy.

Instead, he is lifted on the cross and glorified by God to claim countless people for salvation and mercy. God glorifies himself (reveals himself) in failure because God seeks us out in our failures. We are the trophy.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Crucifying Success

What would you do if success didn't matter? What would you do if nothing counted other than experiencing sheer joy in doing it? What would you do if you didn't have to measure your efforts or outcomes by the standards of the law? What would you try if you didn't have to worry about whether it worked or not? And most powerful of all, what good would you do if it didn't matter that anyone noticed? This is the kind of freedom that Christ died for. Jesus crucified success. This is the paradox that Jesus alludes to when he says that if you love your life you'll lose it, but if you lose it you'll keep it into eternity. All our clamoring for acceptance and validation are exposed as temporary and therefore not life-giving. Championships fade by the next season. Oscar-winning performances are rarely repeated by the same actor. Politicians are barely elected before they are fundraising again. Financial success requires daily striving. And I'm sure plenty of other videos will go viral and bury our memories of the guy drinking Ocean Spray. Human glory is impermanent.

When we are free from chasing old dreams of glory, we become new people. We do things out of freedom and leave the results in God's hands. I have felt this as a parent. It's so easy to stress about doing things the right way. Looking at a book of Baby's First Mandarin Words at the library, I was filled with a sense of shame that I haven't worked hard enough to make my 13-month-old bilingual. You wonder about what your kids will turn out to be (and what kinds of things they will say about you). But when the prospect of success or failure is removed,

parenting remains just a task and a gift. You can truly love your kids when your own glory as a parent is no longer part of the equation. It's more powerful to consider that I will experience the presence of Christ in those places of failure, frustration, and forgiveness—and experience God's true glory there. All our relationships bear more crosses than glories. We are freed to enter them more fully when we know we don't carry those crosses alone.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Fruitful Failure

What does this mean for the world? It's hard to say. The thing that is most wonderful and most frustrating about the gospel is that it resists our attempts to treat it as a kind of normative pattern for transforming the world. The gospel does not work as an "if/then" formula; that's the way the law works. The best we can say is that once we see our own personal glory-projects crucified in the cross, we can begin to see the world's glory-projects crucified in the same way. Christ's glory is not about worldly progress. Christ's glory draws all people to him, and claims them from the ruler of the world who is "cast out." The point is not a better world but a new one. Jesus compares himself to a seed that cannot produce fruit unless it "falls into the ground and dies," and he calls everyone seeking after him to come and die with him. Through the cross, Jesus undergoes the fruitful failure that allows a new world to begin. That new world is pledged to us in our baptisms, given to us in Holy Communion, and revealed to us in all the cracks of life we experience as the old world falls apart. While the old world seeks glory, the cross pushes up through its parched soil to promise us new life.