

Fifth Sunday in Lent

LOOKING FOR DEATH IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES

John 12:20-33

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Analysis by Stephan K. Turnbull

20Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24Very 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. 25Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27Now 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. 28Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Setting the Scene

One hears the rustling of the wings of the angel of death quite distinctly throughout this entire Lenten pericope. The arrival of "some Greeks" wishing to see Jesus ushers in the beginning of the mortal hour toward which Jesus has been pointing and for which we readers have been waiting (cp. 2:4, 7:30, 8:20, and also 13:1). Jesus announces now that the hour of his own cruciform glorification has come, and he parabolizes his death and its effect also for those who follow him (12:24-26). Even the Johannine Jesus struggles with this horrible assignment, but still he knows that it is "for this purpose" (12:27) that he has come. Only thus and exactly thus shall Jesus manifest God's glory (12:28) and accomplish His cosmic victory (12:31). It is when he is lifted up that he will draw the whole world (pantas) to himself.

DIAGNOSIS: Death without Jesus

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : We Run from It

We are not natively prone to be very effective seeds. Falling into the ground and dying to produce fruit that someone else is supposed to enjoy is just not very high on our human agenda. Even when death is just a metaphor like "dying to self" or "self-sacrifice," we do as little dying as we can. There's a very good reason that a whole economic system built on self-interest has been the dominant economic force in our era. We don't want to "die."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : We Hide from It

But death is not always a metaphor, stinking up our lives while we yet breathe. Sometimes death is literal, taking away our breath itself. We fear it. We hide from it. We make the impossible illusion of its eradication the ultimate goal of our medicine. And we have great trouble understanding how things

could be any other way. We are as befuddled by Jesus' bold march toward death as the crowds in 12:34. Death simply does not compute for hearts hardwired for self-preservation and self-advancement. We don't want to die.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *We're Going To Do It Anyway*

But die we shall. Fight death all you want, as long as you're used to losing. Physical death is a permanent feature of life this side of the Jordan, and when we choose to deny Jesus' cross, we choose not life but merely a death without Jesus. We choose a death that is alone and hopeless. We throw our lot in with the ruler of this world instead and find ourselves cast out along with his evil and doomed regime (12:31). We shall die an eternal death.

PROGNOSIS: Death with Jesus

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Dying For Us*

Of course, it is not like Jesus ever really thought we were going to embrace his march to the cross as our own. That is why he went there for us, to die there in our place, precisely because we wouldn't and couldn't choose this path on our own. We try to avoid it; he was dead set on it. But then he appears to us again – maybe in a closed room, maybe on a lakeshore, maybe gathered together with other doubters – and gives himself to us again. A little human depravity never stopped a Savior like this. Though we esteemed him not; he esteemed us much and will come back and take us to be with him forever, that where he is, there we shall also be.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Dying with Him*

A heart that sees, believes, and trusts Jesus and what he has done, then also sees, believes, and trusts what He is doing. Such a heart begins not only to understand but also even to embrace Jesus and his paradoxical path. It may seem to the

unenlightened that life on earth is just one long path to death, but eyes that have been opened see that death with Jesus is really the path to life. Our instinct to run might just start tugging in the opposite direction, crossward.

Step 6: Prognosis (External Solution) : *Dying We Live*

"I am God's grain!" cried Ignatius to the Christians in Rome while en route to his martyrdom (Ignatius Romans 4.1). Evangelized by John and taken over by Jesus just as Ignatius was, we just might begin to squeak our own voices to join this chorus. Ignatius learned from Jesus via John, as do we, to look for death in all the right places, which is to say, we start dying as Jesus did. Ignatius' discipleship meant literal death. Ours might too, though more often in our part of the world will the death of the disciple be of the metaphorical sort. But we're learning to follow Jesus there. We find ourselves to be rather more set on it, no longer loving life in this world, and therefore bearing much fruit, fruit which, naturally, is of no use to the seed, but which feeds everyone around. The very dying we once sought to avoid, turns out to be the only real living we'll ever do.