

ALTARED LIFE: Sacrificial Bravery

John 12:20-33

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/altared-life-sacrificial-bravery/

I.

In 2015, we took our first and only family trip to Disneyworld with my niece and nephew, who were 8 and 10 at the time. This trip was also their very first airplane ride. They were thrilled about it all and could hardly wait to go. For my niece, time didn't always make sense at her young age, and there were several exchanges of "Is it time to go?" followed by "Not yet."

"Are we going to Disneyworld this week?" "Not yet."

"Is tomorrow when we go to Disneyworld?" "Not yet."

Finally, the long-awaited day arrived. We drove to the St. Louis airport to board our flight, which was as exciting as the promise of Disney itself. The airport had a sense of magic all its own.

We gave Blake and Morgan each a window seat so they could watch as we took off and the world got smaller beneath us. With her dolly in her arms and an iPad in her lap, Morgan looked with excitement out the window, making little squealing noises of delight. After a few moments, Morgan exclaimed, "We're so high!" I laughed gently and said, "Morgan, we haven't taken off yet! We're still on the ground."

Not yet, but just wait.

Without knowing it, she was settling for the height of the runway. It was already more than she could imagine. But we had greater heights and adventures in store for her and Blake. The hour was about to come.

Throughout the Gospels, there was talk of a certain hour and when it would come for Jesus. Several instances before our reading today in John's Gospel, beginning with the wedding in Cana (John 2:4), Jesus or the Gospel authors say that his hour has not arrived. But in today's text, Jesus finally says, "The hour has come." (v. 23).

So, what was his hour, and why had it finally arrived?

II.

Tensions have been rising, and now, Jerusalem is at this feverish pitch, the bustling capital flooded with travelers from all over to celebrate the Passover holiday. Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead, and the enthusiastic talk about this miracle has set in motion the local authorities' plot to kill Jesus. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem on a donkey in fulfillment of ancient prophecies. John's Gospel indicates that the crowds who gather waving palm branches are there because they have either seen the miracle of Lazarus or heard about it.ⁱ The world is

paying attention to Jesus – his miracles, his teachings, his table-flipping in the temple, and now his power and authority, which even death seems to cave to when Jesus commands Lazarus to come forth from the tomb.

Looking at the gathered crowds from a distance, the religious leaders are concerned and whisper to each other: "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" (v. 19)

The world has gone after him. The world has gone crazy for him. It is no longer just the Jews. The Gentiles or Greeks, the non-Jews, have come seeking Jesus now, too, represented by these two who have come asking to see Jesus.

But instead of responding to these Jesus-seekers directly, Jesus's response to Andrew and Philip is this: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." (v. 23)

The disciples have been asking and wondering when Jesus would take things to the next level. They could feel the tension in the air and the hope among the growing followers of Jesus. The welcome parade for Jesus seemed like a good sign. They were in Jerusalem, and it felt like a beautiful day to overthrow an empire. The disciples still had in their hearts that Jesus would establish an earthly kingdom despite Jesus's continual teachings that his way would lead to suffering and death on the cross. The disciples would have settled for an earthly kingdom, but Jesus said, "That is too small. I will take us to even greater heights than you can imagine when I am lifted up. And now the hour has come."

The hour appears to have finally arrived with some foreign travelers seeking Jesus. In the opening chapter of John's Gospel, the author writes, "No one has ever seen God" — but Jesus has come so that, in and through seeing him, God may be known (1:18). In the beginning, although Jesus is "in the world," "the world did not know him" (1:10). But in our text today, after three years of ministry, teaching, and healing, the religious leaders see the response of the people and recognize what is true: "the world has gone after him." ⁱⁱ In short, the word is out. Jesus' purpose to make the unseeable God known is finally being fulfilled, and for this very reason, it is time for the next part of the story, the next movement in the symphony. But before we get there, a story.

III.

Today is St. Patrick's Day, a holiday that has evolved (or maybe regressed) into a celebration of Irish culture with parades, special foods, music, dancing, drinking, and a whole lot of green. However, the day, also known as the Feast of St. Patrick, was set aside in 1631 in Ireland to honor the life of St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, who died in the 5th century.

The legend of St. Patrick revolves around Maewyn Succat (MAE-win sue CAT), who later became known as Patrick. Born in Roman Britain, he was kidnapped and brought to Ireland as an enslaved person at age 16, around 400 AD. During his six years of captivity, deprived of food,

clothes, and community, Maewyn turned to his Christian faith and developed a deep connection with God through hours of daily prayer.

Patrick describes his remarkable story in his *Confessio*, a form of autobiography. He escaped from captivity, returned to Britain, and experienced a profound calling to become a priest. Later, he had a vision urging him to return to Ireland, the land of his former enslavement, to share about God's love in Jesus Christ.

St. Patrick left his family and returned to a place of past suffering. He devoted his life to missionary work in Ireland, using his past experiences to connect with the people and share about Christ. St. Patrick's dedication to spreading Christianity in Ireland made him an honored figure in the country, and he is celebrated annually on March 17, the supposed anniversary of his death. Patrick's willingness to lose his life and serve Jesus by following him back to the land of his enslavement was the planting of a seed that resulted in a rich harvest for Christ throughout Ireland.

IV.

Jesus says, "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." (vv.24-26)

For Jesus, the seed of his life will die, but then he rises again and bears much fruit. The same will be true for those who follow him. In other words, a human life is freed from serving oneself and is free to serve God and others instead. A life that surrenders our comforts, preferences, egos, privileges, agendas, and even our very own lives in service to God and others. A life that recognizes when we serve ourselves, we're settling for sitting on a runway while serving Jesus will take us to heights greater than we could ever imagine.

In his farewell discourse with his disciples, Jesus tells them his coming departure is a way of making room for the disciples to do even greater things (14:12). This is why Jesus came in the first place, he declares, for this hour - the hour of his death, rising, and ascension, which will give birth of a new community. This is what Jesus has in mind when he says, "When I am lifted up" (12:32): a masterpiece in which his death is only the first movement, a symphony that will soar to even greater crescendos on Easter morning, Ascension day, and beyond.ⁱⁱⁱ His disciples, the early followers, St. Patrick, and all the followers to come, including us, are part of the next movement in this symphony.

The political and religious leaders thought they were burying Jesus in a grave, but they were planting him like a seed. They thought they were killing him and a movement, but they were making possible a new harvest of "much fruit," a "lifting up" through which Jesus will "draw all people to himself" (12:32). Seen in this way, the cross is an act of rebellious, redemptive divine irony. What kind of death did Jesus die? A fruitful death, a death that enabled even greater

things to come, including a new community: men and women, young and old, Jews and Greeks, you and me, St. Patrick and St. Romero.

V.

Óscar Romero was an El Salvadoran Catholic priest who worked for social justice and peace from violence in the 70s. He spoke out in sermons and on the radio against injustice, poverty, and violence, particularly during the Salvadoran Civil War, calling on the government to stop killing people in the name of God. His life was often threatened. On March 24, 1980, Romero, preaching in this same John 12 passage, said this in his sermon: "Many do not understand, and they think Christianity should not get involved in such things. But, to the contrary, you have just heard Christ's Gospel, that one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life which history demands of us, that who would avoid the danger will lose their life. In contrast, those who, out of love for Christ, give themselves to the service of others will live like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone. The harvest comes about because it dies, allows itself to be sacrificed in their earth and destroyed. Only by destroying itself does it produce the harvest."

Romero finished his message and transitioned to leading the celebration of the mass. As he did, hitmen, presumed hired by an opposition party leader, came into the church and shot Romero to death at the altar.^{iv}

Romero's earthly life ended much differently than St. Patrick's, but both chose, out of love for Christ and at high personal cost, to give themselves to the service of others, and both resulted in a rich harvest. St. Patrick can be seen as the kernel of wheat that fell to the ground and died (symbolically leaving his homeland, sacrificing comfort and safety) to produce many seeds (Christian converts and the establishment of Christianity in Ireland). St. Romero can be viewed as one who hated his life in this world (in the sense of prioritizing the eternal life of justice and righteousness over his safety and comfort), and in doing so, he kept his life for eternal life. His service and sacrifice exemplified following Christ's path of selflessness and solidarity with the marginalized.

VI.

This morning, I cannot tell you what the cost of following Jesus will be for you or me. St. Patrick didn't know. St. Romero didn't know.

What I do know is this: many of us, including myself, are settling for the runway when Jesus wants to take us to heights far greater than we can imagine. Like the disciples, we have our ideas about what Jesus needs to do, how Jesus needs to do it, and who Jesus should do it through. And often, our ideas do not include any part of us dying in service to God and others – not our comforts, preferences, agendas, egos, privileges, safety, and most certainly not our very lives.

And yet, Jesus says dying is how we truly live. Making God the highest priority in our lives. Dying to ourselves is how God's reign is brought forth in our lives and the world. Altared lives are lives

surrendered to God, lived with sacrificial bravery, buried in the ground like seeds so God might grow and bear fruit in us and draw all people to God.

I cannot tell you what the cost of following Jesus will be for you or me. It may cost you relationships and reputation. It may cost you family and financial gain. It may cost you privileges and preferences. It may cost you time and treasure. It may cost you hopes and dreams. It may cost you comfort and convenience. It may cost your agendas and assumptions. It might even cost your life.

I cannot tell you what the cost of following Jesus will be for you or me, but I can tell you this: the only way to find our lives is to lose them. Jesus paid the ultimate cost to make God and God's immeasurable love known to everyone. He was buried and raised up to birth a new community of people who are called to do the same, being buried with Christ in baptism, raised to walk in the newness of life.

Many of us are settling for the height of the runway, but, friends, Jesus has far greater heights and adventures in store for us. Let us be buried in Christ, so God might raise us up in Christ, to do even greater things in the power of the Holy Spirit. The hour has come for the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-lent-5>

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2024-03-11/john-1220-33-4/>