

Sermon: The Hour “No” Died

Year B, Lent 5

[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#); [Psalm 119:9-16](#); [Hebrews 5:5-10](#); [John 12:20-33](#)

Offered March 18, 2018 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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Today’s reading from John takes place after Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the Passover celebration on the donkey with people shouting Hosanna. We will celebrate that entry next week on Palm Sunday. But for today, let us join with the other non-Jews, the Greeks, surrounding Jesus. Like them, let us ask to see Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, this moment, probably in the Temple, amidst the disciples and the crowds and doubtless under the eyes of the Roman soldiers brought into Jerusalem to keep the peace, the Roman peace, during the Passover celebration, this moment is the last of Jesus’ public ministry. He will give a farewell discourse to his disciples, they will have a last supper together, he will wash their feet, the feet of those who will betray him, first one, and then all of them. He will have a trial of sorts with the Jewish and Roman authorities. But in the Gospel of John, this is the final moment of his public ministry. *We wish to see Jesus* (John 12:21) they say. Remember that in John’s gospel, “seeing” is the verb for truly understanding what Jesus is offering us. *We wish to see Jesus*, and one last time, Jesus sums up what he has been teaching all along.

He says a lot, about a grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying (John 12:24), about loving life and losing it (John 12:25), about how serving him means following him (John 12:26), about the ruler of the earth being driven out (John 12:31). Because we know what’s coming, about that last supper together and the betrayal, about the show trial, about the crucifixion, about the resurrection, we think we know what he’s talking about. But in jumping ahead, in leaping out of this moment and into the glorious Easter resolution of the Holy Week train wreck that follows this last instant of Jesus’ public ministry, we may be missing the lesson Jesus is teaching. *We wish to see Jesus* we say, and then we hurry on ahead to get a view of the Christ, the anointed one, raised from the dead, by his God and our God. Let us take this moment to actually see Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth is fully human. In this last lesson of his public ministry, he says something utterly, fully human. *‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”?’* (John 12:27) How could his soul not be troubled? How could he not long to ask God to save him from this hour? *Now is the judgment of this world* (John 12:31) Jesus says. And he knows that no one likes to be judged. Especially not this world, this System with a capital “S”, that humanity has set up.

We have set up a System that runs on, is fueled by, domination, violence and death.¹ The rich and powerful control how the social, political and economic networks run and all those networks run in their favor. We all strive to be rich and powerful, and if we can’t get to be truly rich and powerful, we strive to be richer and more powerful. We do everything we can to help our kids become richer and more powerful than we are. Even when we fight against the System, most of the time we are fighting simply to make it easier for a more diverse collection of people to become rich and powerful. We have set up this System to be so robust, so all encompassing, that

¹ Charles L. Campbell, “Fifth Sunday in Lent, Homiletical Perspective, John 12:20-33” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 143.

the domination, violence and death all point in a single direction, to ensuring that humanity says “No” to any change to the System.² We have created this System to be sure that humanity says “No” to any alternatives to domination, violence and death. We have created this System to say “No” now and forever.

How can Jesus of Nazareth not have a troubled soul? How can Jesus not ask to be saved from this hour, from the response of this System which has been building for all the years of his ministry? Jesus is facing the “No” that the System has been designed to issue. If he doesn’t knock it off pretty soon, the System is going to deploy physical, permanent violence against him. Just as it has done against every individual who has stood against the System up to then.

Sir, we wish to see Jesus we say. And then we leap ahead. To Easter. To God reaching into the flow of human history and changing its course forever. So when we hear Jesus say *Whoever serves me, the Father will honor* (John 12:26) or the voice from heaven saying *I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again* (John 12:28), we know what it means. It means that it takes a “Yes” from God³ to break the System open, to create the change that has to come in order for the Kingdom to be brought forth in this world.

And it does. It does. The System we have built on domination, violence and death is too powerful. It takes God’s intervention, it takes God offering God’s “Yes” to the possibility of change. The System is incapable of reversing itself,⁴ so it grinds on, slowly and eternally saying “No” to the possibility of God’s kingdom breaking forth in this world.

The first line in this last lesson of Jesus’ public ministry is *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified* (John 12:23). The hour for glory has come. Not the hour of glory.⁵ The hour of glory will come later, perhaps at the Resurrection, definitely at the Ascension to heaven. But the hour for glory is here in this moment. This hour, this moment, sets the chain of events in motion that lead to the hour of glory.

This is the moment when we say *Sir, we wish to see Jesus*. Very well, if we wish to see Jesus, see in the sense of really understanding Jesus, then this is what we will and we must see.⁶ Jesus does not ask to be spared this hour, because it contains the reason of his life.⁷ Jesus gathers up the whole of his own human existence, gathers up his troubled soul, and accepts whatever the System will do to him,⁸ including dying on a cross. In this hour, Jesus, the man grown from that wee baby in Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling clothes like our own babies, like our very own selves, in this hour, Jesus sets out on the path to reveal the kind of God whose love can no longer be questioned.⁹ No matter what happens, no matter how much betrayal and horror is to come,

² Margaret A. Farley, “Fifth Sunday in Lent, Theological Perspective, John 12:20-33” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 142.

³ Farley, 142.

⁴ Farley, 142.

⁵ Wilbert F. Howard, “The Gospel According to St. John: Exegesis,” vol. 8 in *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952): 662.

⁶ Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 170.

⁷ Farley, 142.

⁸ Farley, 144.

⁹ Farley, 144.

nothing, nothing will diminish the love of God in his human heart.¹⁰ Jesus accepts what will now inevitably come, takes to himself the whole of the human situation, in order to make possible the human “Yes” to the unending future of God’s kingdom. This is the hour when a human “Yes” will set out to meet the divine “Yes”, and sealed in death, neither will be revoked.¹¹

So the System built to deliver the eternal human “No” is broken open by a “Yes” from God, of course. But that “Yes” from God is met by a human “Yes” to God.¹²

Most of the time when we say *Sir, we wish to see Jesus*, we mean that we want to catch a glimpse of his divine nature. We dismiss his human nature as less interesting, a sort of inadequate packaging whose gaps and holes allow rays of divine light shoot out of from time to time. So in this moment, in this hour when the Son of Man is to be glorified, let’s really look at what’s in front of us, in the middle of the hurly, burly crowds leading up to the Passover feast. Let us look at what’s in front of us, before that last supper, before the betrayal and the crucifixion and everything else we leap over in our haste to get to the clearly divine stuff.

There is Jesus of Nazareth, Mary and Joseph’s boy. Later, in the coming days, in that part we skim past, he will say that those who believe in him will do greater works than him (John 14:12). In this hour, Jesus says that the grains of wheat must die to what they are if they are not to remain alone and fruitless.¹³ How will we, those grains of wheat, die? The same way he did. We will be delivered up to the forces of evil.¹⁴ We will set in front of the System, which through its domination, violence and death is demanding our “No”. We will be invited to drink from the same cup as Jesus. We will be invited to carry the same cross. We will be invited to surrender to God. We will be invited to offer our “Yes” to meet the divine “Yes.”

When we treat Holy Week lightly, when we dismiss or minimize the humanity of Jesus, we miss a fundamental portion of the lesson he is offering us, in this hour. The cross of Jesus offers salvation. Salvation we cannot earn and we do not deserve. But the cross of Jesus also symbolizes the invitation from Jesus to participate in the new life outside the System bent on destruction. It is this invitation to bring our fully human selves to the cup, to the cross, that heals us so the demands of the cup and the cross can be fulfilled.¹⁵

In this hour, *we wish to see Jesus*. We want to see where the challenges we are still engaged in took root. We wish to truly understand how necessary we are to saying “Yes” to God’s Kingdom. We wish to stand with Jesus in the hour that “No” dies.

¹⁰ Farley, 144.

¹¹ Farley, 144.

¹² Farley, 142.

¹³ Farley, 140.

¹⁴ Farley, 144.

¹⁵ Farley, 144.