

Dying to Live
John 12:20-33
John Breon

At the beginning of John 12, Jesus was having dinner with Lazarus and his family. Lazarus had been dead just a few days before, but Jesus restored him to life.

Lazarus' sister, Martha, served the meal. His other sister, Mary, took an expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet. The house was filled with the fragrance. And, we can imagine, the fragrance lingered on Jesus for days.

Judas Iscariot objected, saying the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. But we're told that he didn't really care about the poor, but he was a thief. He kept the disciples' money bag and used to help himself to what was in it.

But Jesus sees Mary's act as preparing for his burial. He knows that he is on the way to die. Hearing that Jesus was in Bethany, a crowd gathered because of him and also because they wanted to see Lazarus. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus (again) as well because on account of him many people were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

The next day, the crowd that came to see Lazarus and the crowd of pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast were stirred with excitement as Jesus approached the city. He entered Jerusalem on the day called Palm Sunday. We get that name from John's mention of palm branches that the crowd waved as they greeted Jesus (v 13). They shouted, "Hosanna!" and acclaimed Jesus as king. The crowds misunderstood Jesus. They were right that he is King, but they didn't know what kind of king he is. He demonstrated the character of his rule by riding a donkey, rather than a warhorse, into the city.

Even as the crowds misunderstood Jesus, the religious authorities both misunderstood him and were threatened by him. Neither the crowds nor the leaders saw who Jesus really was. So they finally rejected him. "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John

1:11). But by rejecting Jesus, his opponents provided the way for him to be ultimately glorified (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* 876).

Some Pharisees complained that the whole world had gone after Jesus (12:19). That sets the stage for the next scene when some Greeks come and ask to see Jesus. These foreigners came to Jesus' disciple Philip who had a Greek name and who perhaps spoke some Greek. His town of Bethsaida in Galilee was close to Gentile areas, including the Decapolis, the Ten Cities on the east side of Lake Galilee. Possibly, these Greeks are from that region. Some of them may have already known of Philip or some of the other disciples from that area. Philip goes and tells Andrew about the Greeks' request. Andrew and Philip were the first people Jesus invited to be his disciples in this Gospel (1:39, 43). They were some of the first to invite others to come to Jesus. It seems appropriate that they'd be the first to bring a group of non-Jewish people to meet Jesus.

When Philip and Andrew tell Jesus that these Greeks want to see him, Jesus seems to ignore them. But the coming of these Gentiles to Jesus leads him to exclaim that "the hour has come." He said several times through this Gospel that his hour was not yet or his time had not yet come. But now Jesus declares that his time has come. It's now the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified. And when the Son of Man is glorified, he'll give life to Gentiles as well as Jews. For Jesus to be glorified includes suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Jesus compares his death to a seed being planted (v 24). Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and "dies" it remains alone. But by "dying" it produces much fruit and many new seeds. Jesus' death is the means of bringing life to all. His death produces the great harvest of all who will come to him for life.

Jesus not only talks about being planted like a seed, he also speaks of being "lifted up" (v 32). Being lifted up is being exalted to a position of honor. But Jesus is exalted by way of the cross. In the Roman world, crucifixion, the cross, was the deepest shame. But this worldly shame becomes Jesus' honor and glorification. Honor from God and honor from the world exclude each other (Keener 873).

Jesus is lifted up, glorified, on the cross (see 3:14-15; 8:28). His being glorified is closely related to refusing to seek his own glory (8:50, 54). He's willing to expend himself completely to fulfill God's purpose. He gives himself to disappear from sight like the seed when the earth covers it. He dies so new life can spring up (F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*). Jesus' prayer for the Father's name to be glorified is a prayer of submission to the Father's will similar to his prayer in the garden: "Not my will but yours, Father" (Matthew 26:39). It wasn't easy. He says here that his soul is troubled. But his will is to do the Father's will, to fulfill his purpose.

So we have these two images of Jesus' death—planted like a seed that produces much fruit and being lifted up on the cross to draw all people to himself. These images show that Jesus gave his life in order to give life to many others.

Redemption comes through God's self-sacrifice. Not grand displays of power, but the weakness of Christ on the cross saves us.

And salvation isn't forced on us. Christ on the cross *draws* us to himself, attracts us to himself. The Holy Spirit uses that attraction to tug at our hearts and call for our response.

A boy was explaining his response to go forward and receive Christ at an evangelistic service. He said, "My mom loves me and I love her back. My dad loves me and I love him back. It seemed that if God loves me so much I should love God back."

Jesus' love and sacrifice—the cross—is for all the world. "I will draw all people to myself" (v 32). Those Greeks who came to see Jesus got included and everyone who will come is included.

Along with all this is the call to discipleship. Jesus calls us to give up our lives. If we'll be his followers, we have to let go of our lives and lose ourselves in commitment to Christ. The cross is for us as his followers.

Jesus' followers share his sufferings to share his glory. What's true of Jesus (v 24) is true of his followers as well (25-26). Jesus did what he did in a unique way. He stood alone against the power of sin and death so the rest of us won't have to. At the same time, he pioneered the road, he blazed the trail where his servants, his followers, must go after him. This may be part of his challenge to his followers and to the Greeks. "If they really want to 'see'

him, to get to know him and understand what he's about for themselves, they must get ready to be 'planted' in the same way, to risk all in his service" (Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*).

Jesus died to live. He couldn't have lived again in resurrection if he hadn't died. He died to give life to us. We also die to live. As we give up our lives to him, we find new life.

To "love" our life here means giving it priority over the interests of God's kingdom. To "hate" our life is to give priority to the interests of God's kingdom over our own life. Serving Jesus means following him, imitating him in some way, being the kind of servant he was. Disciples facing the Teacher's death have to give up our vested interest in the world and follow Jesus in the way of servanthood (J. Ramsey Michael, *John. A Good News Commentary*).

This applies to the church as well as to individuals. Churches can die as a result of resisting change or we can die in order to live. That means letting go or abandoning parts of our experience and expectations of what the church is and should be. If we insist that the church be for us, then it will only be for us. And it'll eventually wither and die. As a congregation, we need to see ourselves as being here for the sake of others. We don't exist as a church just for our own sake, but for others. Claiming that reality means dying to ourselves and finding life. Refusing that reality means just dying.

God raised up this church for this community. We're to be a witness, to shine God's light here, to serve as an outpost of God's kingdom.

"Resurrection power works best in graveyards" (Ray Steadman). Jesus calls us to put to death those things in our lives that keep us from becoming all that God intends us to be. In the Bible, dying to self means recognizing our own inadequacy and the many ways we avoid accepting our need for God. The wonder of the gospel is that God gives "beauty for ashes." Out of the ash heap of our lives new life and wonder spring forth (Mike Regele, *Death of the Church* 198-99, 201, 206, 239).

If we lose ourselves in Christ we're like seed sown that produces fruit. God uses us to extend his love, his invitation to the world. God uses us to

show the Savior lifted up on the cross. Like Jesus, we allow ourselves to be poured out, to be covered up for God's purpose to be fulfilled.

Jesus was raised from the dead because he was willing to die. In our weakness, in giving ourselves, in our surrender God gives strength to us and uses what we give him. God picks up what we're willing to lay down.

In the late fourth or early fifth century in Britain, there was a young man named Maewyn Succat. He was kidnapped by Irish pirates and sold as a slave in Ireland. During his years there, he turned to God and God helped him. He eventually escaped and returned to Britain. Later he went to Gaul (France) and was trained and ordained as a priest. He heard the call of God and in a vision heard the Irish people calling him to return to them. Now known by the name/title Patricius—we know him as St. Patrick—he went back to the land where he had been a slave and shared the gospel. Because he was willing to surrender and give his life to God's purpose, thousands of people became followers of Jesus and hundreds of churches were planted in Ireland. Some years ago there was a book called *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. It tells of the influence of Irish Christians during the Dark Ages. They preserved literature and learning. They scattered all over Europe, establishing monasteries—centers of worship and learning. Patrick's life was a seed that bore that kind of fruit. (There are numerous online articles that give the outline of St. Patrick's story. Also see George Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*.)

Robert Morrison went from England to China as a missionary in the early 1800s. His desire was "that God would station him in that part of the missionary field where the difficulties were greatest and to all human appearances the most insurmountable." And that's kind of what he got. There were many restrictions on mission work. But he learned the language so well that he became a translator for the East India Company. That's how he earned most of his income. Morrison worked hard for the mission but he had to stick mostly to literary activities because of the cultural and political difficulties he encountered. He wrote a Chinese grammar, an Anglo-Chinese dictionary and encyclopedia, as well as tracts, books, and a hymn book. Most importantly he built on the work of earlier Catholic missionaries and

translated the Bible with a team of Chinese helpers. But he saw very few converts during his lifetime.

He also treated the sick in his dispensary and founded an Anglo-Chinese school at Malacca. As interpreter for the East India Co. he was forced to become a negotiator in the Anglo-Chinese War. When Morrison was asked shortly after his arrival in China if he expected to have any spiritual impact on the Chinese, he answered, "No sir, but I expect God will!" His faithfulness was rewarded in God's good time as Morrison, the forerunner, laid the foundation for the later missionary labors of Hudson Taylor and many others, which enjoyed such wide success and great rewards (<http://www.disciplemagazine.com/www/articles/191.1031>). Official estimates state that there are thirty-one million Christians in China today, and the number may actually be much higher (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_China).

Morrison's life and work were like seed planted and buried that bore much fruit. Are we willing to let our lives be seeds that will grow into a harvest for God's glory?

Jesus tells us what will happen if we follow him this way. We'll be with him and the Father will honor us. That's another way of saying what verse 25 says about having eternal life, because eternal life is related to being with Jesus in the Father's love. Jesus wants his disciples to know that they'll be with him and that his love is stronger than death. Later he makes it clear that they'll join him in the Father's presence and see the fullness of the glory he receives from the Father. The Father glorifies the Son. When we serve and follow the Son, the Father honors us and gives us a share in his glory.

Jesus mentions the world is being judged and the prince or ruler of this world is being driven out. That's the kind of talk people were looking for from a messiah. They thought that next he might tell them to sharpen their swords and help him attack the Roman garrison beside the temple. But that's not the kind of Messiah Jesus is. He did aim to overthrow the kingdom of the world and replace it with the kingdom of God. He was driving out the devil who sought to rule the world. But Jesus' victory came through being "lifted up" on a cross. "That's how the world would be

rescued. That's how God, the true God, the God of astonishing, generous love, would be glorified. Swords don't glorify the creator-God. Love does. Self-giving love best of all" (Wright).

The last part of this chapter concludes Jesus' public ministry. It summarizes the continued resistance of some of the Jews, especially their leaders. In spite of Jesus' glorious signs, many wouldn't believe. At the same time, many did believe. But they kept it a secret. They wouldn't confess their faith because of fear and because they loved praise from people more than praise from God. That's not what Jesus intends for his disciples. We declare our faith knowing that if people reject us, God honors us.

A United Methodist preacher named Eddie Fox visited a church in Estonia. For the benediction, they asked, "As you go into the world, do you have anything to declare?" The congregation's response was "Jesus Christ is Lord!" As Eddie returned to the U. S., the customs officer at the airport asked, "Do you have anything to declare?" What do you think Eddie said? "Jesus Christ is Lord!" And the man said, "Well, I'll declare!" (Jim Buskirk, First UMC, Tulsa, 10/13/91, audio tape).

Jesus gives his final public invitation and challenge in verses 44-50. It still comes to us. Yield, give in, surrender to Jesus' love and sacrifice attracting you to God. Come out of the darkness into the light. And declare that Jesus Christ—lifted up on the cross, in resurrection and ascension—is Lord. Give yourself to him, lose your life to enter into his life.