

LENT FIVE, YEAR B, MARCH 21, 2021

"And the Greeks came to Philip and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'" These Greeks appeared in Jerusalem during the festival. They approach one of the disciples of Jesus with this very specific request, "we wish to see Jesus".

Truth is, we don't know why those Greeks were in Jerusalem. Did they have some interest in the Hebrew religion and tradition? Were they people from throughout the Mediterranean world called "God fearers" by ancient Jewish folk? Nor do we know what these visitors had heard about Jesus or what they expected to find: an inspirational rabbi, a good preacher, a fortune teller, a miracle worker, a magician -- or the Son of God. We just don't know.

What we know is this: They came seeking, searching, questioning, inquiring, desiring. The Greeks came seeking Jesus and I think we need to ask ourselves the same question: are we seeking Jesus? And if we are, where do we find him? The very simple answer, of course, is that we find him in one another.

And that takes some doing. Jesus tells us: "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." So, for the grain to germinate, it has to be covered with dirt, and has to die. To follow Jesus, we have a choice: die to self-ego or cling to a self-centered life. When self-preservation is our primary goal, we believe we have the truth, we know who is loved by God and who isn't and our preconceived notion about others is sacrosanct. We forget about the needs of others and don't allow ourselves to be challenged to see that spark of God in someone else especially those we disdain or despise or consider our enemies. I do believe, this in part, is why there is a rise in hatred and racial attacks against Asians and people of color. It is probably the biggest challenge we all face – seeing God in others.

This is why the phrase "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" is the theme and the center of this story. In a very real way this statement defines the task of the community of faith we call the Christian church. In fact, these words are engraved on many pulpits throughout Christendom as a reminder as to what preaching is about. Actually, more than that it is a reminder what the mission of the church is about which is presenting the person, the meaning, and message of God's love in Jesus so that he might be seen. That's why we exist, our purpose and our mission as the Christian church is to make that love known and visible. It is to make Jesus known and visible so that people who are seeking might find him.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." In many ways the Gospel's Greek sight-seers are patron saints for us people of the 21st century. The request itself is the request of seekers, and that is precisely who we are today. Pollsters tell us that around 87 percent of Americans believe in God or a universal life spirit. However, the style of American believing is not nearly as settled as it was in previous generations. Assumptions about denominations and church attendance and "normal" forms of religion have been blown

out of the water. Believing is not so much about certainties and answers. Instead, to believe is to seek, to search, to inquire, to try different forms of spirituality. The posture for today's folks is that of a question, a journey, a seeking pilgrimage.

The request of those seeking, searching Greeks in the Gospel is our request as well: "I want to see Jesus." Sometimes it is a request that emerges out of a sense of longing for God and for a whole and holy relationship with God. And sometimes it is a request that sounds more like "Listen, I want to see the manager, and I want to see him right now!" when I don't understand what is going on, or things make no sense, or I am hurt, suffering and perplexed by the difficulties and antagonisms of this world. In both ways, we are sharing a longing, a searching, and a seeking that is so much a part of human spirituality and experience today.

So often I hear, as do you, people who say they don't need church to see God. They're too busy to go to church or there are other pressing needs and so they say, "I can see God in a rainbow, in a walk on the beach, in beautiful sunrises and sunsets, in the starkness of a desert. Yes, God is present in all of nature that surrounds us. But Jesus is not just about a God of rainbows and butterflies and long walks on the beach. Jesus is about a God who gets down into the mayhem and muck and mess of life.

Frankly, this is the Jesus we not only want to see but need. This is the Jesus we want when we demand to see the manager because we are overwhelmed with the complexities of life. We want to see a Jesus who completely relates to our feelings of loneliness and abandonment and failure. We want a Jesus who understands pain and suffering and death. We want a Jesus who was bullied and spit upon and whose friends left him for dead. We need a Jesus who is not all rainbows and butterflies and sunsets but one who suffered and died on the Cross to ultimately show us the love of God.

The purpose, and the mission of God's church is to present this love of God in real ways, to present Jesus as a human friend, companion, and guide who relates to our pain yet also our greatest joys.

The work of the body of Christ, the mission of God's church, is to present God's love in Jesus so that he might be seen. It is to invite those who are seeking from the depths of their hearts to find love, hope, strength, and compassion in the presence of God. As such the stance of the church is to be one of invitation not judgment, of openness not condemnation, of inquiry not pat answers.

Today's Gospel story gives a powerful picture of what we will see as our request to see and meet Jesus is fulfilled. When Jesus talks about seeds growing and dying and being lifted up from the earth he is saying if you want to seek me, if you want to find me, if you want to know me, then look at the cross and my love poured out on it. To see Jesus, to meet him, is to see and to meet the Crucified One. What do we see when we meet the crucified one? We meet someone who has been through the muck and mess of life and the depths of hell, yet is completely inviting of all humanity and of all that a human being is. What we experience is the loving embrace of God, a welcome to anyone or any part

of anyone who is seeking. What we come to know is that as much as we have been seeking and searching so God has been seeking and searching for us.

But if you're still wondering how to see Jesus, look at the people around you, your family, your friends, your colleagues, your co-workers, and see the face of Christ in them as people who are dearly and deeply loved by God.

If you wish to see Jesus, look at the strangers, people you don't even know well or at all, and see the arms of God longing to embrace them too. If you wish to see Jesus, look into yourself, into your heart and your soul, into that place deep within where you long for and yearn for God.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Let us recognize that we are always seeking and that God welcomes our seeking. But most of all let us acknowledge that God is calling us to reach out to other human beings who are also seeking so that we too can see Jesus in them and act accordingly. Amen.