

Lent 5
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

March 17, 2024
Rev. Paul Moore

Rising to the Challenge

Spiritual but not religious. Spiritual but not religious. How many times have I heard that one, especially from strangers who see me in a collar. It comes usually as a sort of self-justification, a defense against what I represent, a shield from what they expect me to demand of them, or a sideways inditement of the church for having lost her way. Sometimes I wonder if they are disappointed when I don't play the game.

Sometimes it's an emotional defense against pain they carry, caused by the Church, that drove them away from what should have been a source of life. Sometimes it's an avoidance tactic, a way of not committing, the ego holding onto the center, afraid to surrender to something greater than themselves.

Somehow, I don't think that's what these Greeks were doing. Maybe they were curious. They had heard about Jesus, and wanted to see for themselves, hoping to see a miracle or to watch how the local Jews responded to him. I'd like to think that they were genuinely interested. Something about Jesus stirred deep yearnings within them. Rome ruled the empire with an iron rod. The Jews were particularly watched, but anyone a distance from Rome was to be carefully managed. I cannot help but think that they, too, felt the weight of the Roman guard. Maybe they had heard enough stories about his teaching that they thought his words could help find a way through. Maybe one of them was ill, or a family member or a friend, and stories of Jesus' healing brought them in search of wellness.

These men are all of us who yearn for God's shalom, God's peace and wellbeing in the world and are so painfully aware of its absence, so, they asked someone from Galilee, the northern region of Palestine, neighbors to their own homeland further north, a border person, who could act as intermediaries because he understood both sides.

The response they got was not at all what I would have expected. We're not told in the text if Jesus ever really meets the Greeks. It's almost as if he goes off on a tangent. *A grain of wheat must die to produce grain. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who lose them for his sake will gain them.* Now, those are familiar themes with Jesus, but then he goes on to show that this is not just a plank in a political platform. Jesus himself is going to blaze the path, and he's not looking forward to it. Yet—this is why he has come. If, as we read in the beginning of this same Gospel, Jesus has come to reveal the heart of God, then this is the heart of God. Giving of oneself, living for the good of others, serving as the greatest honor, this is native to the heart of the divine. If these Greeks want to see Jesus, this is what they have come to see, a mirror on the Creator's heart, which is one of self-giving love.

If this troubles Jesus, it should trouble us. If it doesn't trouble us, perhaps we've missed the point. The church is good at missing the point. We've thought it was about preaching an exclusive message. We've thought it was about being the God club. We've thought it was about world domination. We've thought it was about saying the right words and doing the right things. We've thought Jesus' message justified cruelty and death when we believed it was in our best interest. No wonder some say they are spiritual but not religious. Either by pain inflicted or by hypocrisy discerned, they no longer see the Church as what we are called to be. They know we've missed the point, and they don't want to do the same.

But if we don't miss the point, then it ought to trouble us, because it's about the pain of dying. I think it's telling that it is Greeks who wish to see Jesus. As I said before, they are from the north. They are not Jewish by culture, they are outsiders. They look for an intermediary, an interpreter, if I may, someone who bridges the gap. (Many people from Galilee also spoke Greek, so they may have had this whole short conversation with Philip in Greek rather than Aramaic.) They look for someone willing to de-center themselves and their culture, and allow Jesus' Beloved Community to grow in unexpected ways.

It comforts me that Philip rises to the challenge. He grabs Andrew and they move to answer the yearning of these men. Jesus' discourse can be seen as a commendation of Philip and Andrew. *You two have opened your heart to the Other. You have made introductions with outsiders. You have died to a purely Jewish community of faith and are producing the fruits of a larger one.* Perhaps part of Jesus' trouble is for the heat these two will face from other Jews for their unconventional actions, just as he had on more than one occasion. Indeed, it is to reconcile the sins of self-centeredness and ethnocentric pride that he will die. For this that he will rise again. For this he will ascend into heaven, all parts of what John's Gospel calls Jesus' glorification. To ask the Father to save him from this hour would be to cower from the challenge. It would avoid his true calling. It would miss the point. If we are troubled, it's because we know that following Christ demands decentering ourselves in the world. It means knowing that God is the true center, around which all cultures revolve.

It is not only ancient Greeks who wish to see Jesus. Just like them, the weight of injustice weighs us down, too. A couple of weeks ago I went to a session sponsored by the largest farmworker's union in the two-county area of Skagit and Whatcom, Community to Community. They argued that large industrial farm industries are displacing the local farmworker population with new guest workers from Mexico under the H2A program. They contended that the reason they are doing this is because local farm workers are unionized and demanding better pay, safer working conditions and more benefits, whereas guest workers' visas are held by their employers, and the government does not address abuses in withheld wages, safety in the workplace, and of course, are not required to provide benefits beyond housing and three meals a day. We have the economic need for farm workers and the political need to keep them

undocumented and so without rights. This conveniently leaves it up to the individual farm owner to be noble and good, without protecting the workers from the ones who are not.

Just like them, lack of well-being plagues us as well. At that meeting I heard about a comment that was made in a town in Skagit County a good number of years ago, yet it was said in such a way that I suspected it still stung. A White person said of a Hispanic speaking Spanish in the street, "I don't want to hear that dirty language spoken around me." I admit, when I heard it, it socked me in the gut, too! I thought, "Where are peoples' minds that they would think that way?" But I know the answer. Our ethnocentrism is always challenged by the Other. We want to ask the Father to save us from this hour.

I would like to think that by now such bigotry would not be tolerated, but was it not just four years ago that a couple of young White men beat up a Hispanic man and wrote a racial epithet on his forehead in indelible ink? Was it not also our county prosecutor who refused to prosecute the crime as a hate crime?

Yes, I get it. Intercultural interaction is fraught with anxiety. It requires decentering our own dominant ethnocentric worldview, and that feels like a death. It is not easy—it is hard, it's deadly hard. I should know; I've been doing it all my life. It gets easier with practice, but there is still the friction, the dissonance, the danger of unexpected offense, all those things that I constantly carry within me because of who I happen to be. It is so tempting to pray, "Father, save me from this hour."

Yet Jesus didn't pray that way because it was for this hour that he had come. Philip didn't because it was his calling to be a bridge. We don't, because of who God is calling us to be. On Wednesday evening, a number of us gathered with Jay Bowen, Skagit elder and healer to discuss events in his grandfather's life he has recorded in his book. On Thursday, he called me. He was taken by the way the gathered group listened intently to what he had to share. He is convinced that this kind of listening can change the world, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. When we truly listen to one another, open our hearts and our minds to their lived experience as they are telling it, we hear another human story, different than ours, no more or less redeemed, but just as sacred and precious to the heart of God, and just as capable of showing the world something of God that we cannot. When we hear, and this is what really happened on Wednesday night, another human community's story, again, different than ours, no more or less redeemed, but just as capable of mirroring something unique about the heart of the Creator for the world to see. Confronted by another world, our own ethnocentric center comes into focus, and then we can grant it its proper place, pull back its edges to make room for another peoples, and opening for us the wonder of seeing Greeks meet Jesus.

Father, save me from this hour? No, For this reason I have come to this hour. Father,

glorify your name.