

The Kind of Death He Was To Die
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: John 12:20-33

Two weeks now until Easter. Two weeks to the cross.

We know what lies on the other side of the cross. Arrangements are already being made to decorate our big wooden cross out front with a rainbow of flowers. We can picture it already – a crisp, clear-sky, spring morning. Children in their new Easter outfits. Women in their finest spring dresses. Maybe even a bonnet or two.

But we are not there yet. We still have much to do. These final weeks before Easter bring our focus to what Jesus endured on this side of the cross and the tomb. So we read and reflect, pause and pray, repent and respond.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the day when we recreate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. It was the time of the festival of Passover. In the 12th chapter, the Gospel of John gives us a preview of the events of those days. Verse 20 reads: "Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks." That verse practically invites us to come along, doesn't it, to join those Greeks? Verse 21 continues: "They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'"

We "wish to see Jesus" as well, don't we? If not in the flesh and blood, we come to see him in other ways – to consider the life he led and the life he gave, to model our lives as best we can after the example he set. But in these final days on this side of the cross, we must also consider his death, the kind of death he was to die at the hands of the world. So, let us go with the Greeks to seek Jesus in both life and death.

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The Gospel of John is a one of signs and symbols, of metaphors and images that draw us in and cause us to work, just a bit, to understand Jesus' true meaning. Chapter 12 is no different. Once the Greeks find Jesus' apostles and ask to see Jesus, the story shifts away from the Greeks to a more private exchange between Jesus and the apostles. Jesus knew why he had come to Jerusalem that week and now it was time to tell his closest followers.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” Jesus said. Then Jesus offered a parable:

“Very truly, I tell you,” he began, words that signaled his followers should listen very, very closely, “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.”

Then, we can imagine Jesus leaning in and drawing his apostles even closer to him to hear what he would say next. “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Now, the apostles may have leaned back, stroked their beards and gazed up in thought.

“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Jesus gave them a moment to think as he, himself, lifted his eyes upward and addressed the heavens.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’

Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’

Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people* to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

What are we to make of this story? It is, admittedly, a lot to take in. I suggest we hold two thoughts in mind:

First, that Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John – words about his life and death and what the world was about to do to him – separating once and for all his way and the way of the world. Jesus’ way is that of peace. The world’s way, far too often, is the way of hostility and violence. Jesus’ last week, leading to his death, makes that distinction unmistakable and condemns the violent ways of the world.

Second, Jesus' death accomplishes something even more important. His death, as Jesus says in his own words, "draws all people" to him, all people. In him we all are healed and in him we all can find liberation from the broken ways of the world.

I'll say a word about both points, beginning with how Jesus' death convicts the violence of the world.

In the Greek, the word for "world" that Jesus uses is *kosmos*. But Jesus doesn't mean the planet or the universe. Here *kosmos* means the world as "the system of human existence" and "everything that is hostile to God."¹ So we can rightly read Jesus as talking about "the System," not the system of God but systems we humans construct.

Stop and think about the systems we humans have erected over history. Systems of government and economics, systems of rule and power, systems of support and compassion, cruelty and oppression, systems of justice and injustice. As a people, and yes, as a church, we have much to confess about the systems we create and the institutions that carry out those systems, both the good and the bad they do.

This week, as she was reading through old church records, our Centennial Chair Beth Van Gorp found the kind of history we all suspected was part of this church's story. The same goes for almost every church that lived through the social sea-changes of the last century. Beth discovered clear evidence that this church engaged in the harmful system of segregation ... but later overcame both.

We shouldn't be all that surprised, really. After all, at the dawn of the 20th century, this neighborhood was the first in Charlotte to impose land restrictions barring any property here to be owned or operated by blacks.

By mid-century, change was afoot. In the mid to late 1950s a few brave souls would integrate Charlotte's schools. In 1964, of course, Congress would pass the Civil Rights Act, outlawing segregation in schools, the voting booth, the workplace, the lunch counter and other public places.

The session, the governing board of Caldwell, must have seen the question coming to this church's doorstep . In 1954, it discussed what the church would do if an African-American – the minutes use the term "negro" – sought admittance to the church. The session voted 11-4 that any "negro" seeking admission would be asked to attend a church "of his race" and that no "negro" would be received into membership of the church, should such an occasion present itself.

¹ Danker, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 562

Seven years later in 1961, however, as the race question persisted across the South, the session instructed ushers to "seat colored people who seek admission to worship" and in 1963 the session voted unanimously to seat anyone at worship regardless of "race creed or color"

We can debate whether the people of Caldwell church in the 1950s and 1960s were better or worse, ahead or behind in race relations when compared to other congregations of their day. It's easy, in hindsight and out of context, to condemn them, if anyone is so inclined. But I am not sure what that accomplishes.

Instead, we might look around and ask where we witness the same kind of aggressive oppression and discrimination in our time and place. Unfortunately, we don't have to look far.

As you probably know by now, North Carolina is the last state in the South to face a question that's been decided in all of our neighboring states: whether we will amend the state constitution to limit the definition of family. On May 8, our state will decide whether marriage will, in the eyes of the law, be limited to being between one man and one woman.

Never mind that North Carolina already has a state law banning gay marriage. Never mind that, with that law, we have already told gays and lesbians that the state will not recognize the same fullness of fidelity in marriage as it does for others.

Never mind that the proposed amendment would harm thousands of families of all kinds as well as women, children and elderly retirees by stripping away benefits and protections the law provides traditional married households. Never mind that it would send a signal to the nation and the world that North Carolina is more worried about whom you love than how it might attract and welcome people of all talents, abilities and merits.

No, now we are being asked to escalate our state's degree of discrimination, to make it a part of the state constitution, to codify at the highest level a set of moral beliefs that has no place in legislation in the first place. Here, it seems, some who favor less government in almost every other area of our lives would expand government to legislate their fear and anxiety.

Come to church, I would invite the proponents of this measure. Come to this church and meet the gay couples who sit alongside the rest of us in our pews, who study the Bible and serve God humbly and tirelessly with every gift imaginable. Come and see the

faithfulness and integrity of their relationships, relationships that have passed anniversary after anniversary. Ten, fifteen, twenty years and more, through thick and thin, illness and health, comfort and hardship, trials and triumphs. Come and meet some of the most faithful and committed of God's children, whom our Sovereign Creator made differently, neither better nor worse by science or definition, just differently, people who seek to respond to God's love in Christ on the cross just like the rest of us.

It's the same song, different verse, isn't it? Back in 1950s, this church and thousands of others would not seat other Americans because God gave them darker skin. In 2012, will we say that our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters should be deprived of the full life and protections that the rest of us enjoy? Or will we learn from our past and stop looking for the next minority to put down because one group of God's children cannot accept another?

This weekend, we join dozens of other congregations, spanning 12 faith traditions in Charlotte in lifting these concerns to our Creator and to our neighbors. Today, we do this in worship. Tomorrow, in the public square, I will stand with other members of a coalition called Clergy for Equality to speak against the proposed Amendment One as yet another act of aggressive oppression from yet another broken system, that of homophobia.

If you are interested in learning more about this issue, our members Elder Carl Brinson and Rhett Brown have taken point in Caldwell's response to this proposed amendment. They can tell you more about what you can do, if you are so inclined.

And maybe one day in the not-so-distant future, we will look back and see that society woke up to recognize the full humanity of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters just as it has with others who have been put down by wrong systems and institutions.

Until that day, we have work to do and we are called to remember, over and over again, the words of the apostle Paul who said, faith, hope and love – and the greatest of these is love.

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Now, let me make a second claim about what Jesus says in the Gospel of John, chapter 12. Jesus said:

Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people* to myself.'

The Greek word that Jesus uses when he refers to the judgment of the world is *krisis*, which gives us our modern word, “crisis.” But, church, this is no ordinary crisis. Yes, it is a crisis that condemns the broken and violent systems of the world. But it is also a crisis, a judgment, of grace. And in that grace we are healed and in that healing we can overcome.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he knew it. And now we know it. This was the kind of death Jesus Christ was to die. The kind of death that condemns the violent and heals the humble. Minorities, the outcast and the oppressed of every kind, the meek whom Jesus said one day will inherit the earth, still suffer the cruelty of too many broken systems and institutions – social and economic systems of racism and classism and sexism and homophobia and others.

But the kind of death that Jesus died conveys upon us, his followers, not only the saving grace of God but the compulsion of faith that equips us to be agents of peace and reconciliation in a world of broken systems.

In the name of the one who was and is and is to be again, Jesus the Christ. Amen.