

Welcome!

First Congregational Church
of Webster Groves United Church of Christ



Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

March 21, 2021
Fifth Sunday In Lent
Vernal Equinox

*We respond to God's call
by welcoming everyone
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity,
race, gender identity,
sexual orientation
or socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed
the love of Christ,
we affirm that all may share
in the full life, ministry, fellowship,
responsibilities and blessing
of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are
or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.*

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.

John 12:24, NRSV

ORDER OF WORSHIP

PRELUDE

A Lenten Supplication

Rudolf Dittrich

WELCOME

Phil Shoulberg, *Announcer*

TOLLING OF THE BELL

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; **People**)

from Jeremiah 31

“The days are surely coming,” says the HOLY ONE, “when I will make a new covenant with my people. It will not be like the covenant that I made before, when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was wedded to them,” says the HOLY ONE.

“But this is the covenant that I will make: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

RAISING THE COVENANT

Covenant of 1977

We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God’s promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.

RITUAL OF APPROACH

Invitation to Confession (Responsive)

Rev. Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

Jesus, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.

But only say the word, and your servant will be healed.

Let us confess our sins.

Corporate Confession

Create in Me a Clean Heart (Psalm 51)

Carl F. Mueller

Performed by Dr. Leon Burke III

Silence for Personal Confessions

Assurance of Pardon

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

No longer shall my people teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the HOLY ONE,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

Yes, God will forgive our iniquity, and remember our sin no more.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Halley Kim, *Pastoral Assistant*

THE WORD SHARED

From the Gospels

John 12:20–33

Rev. Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

New Revised Standard Version, ad.

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the [Human One] to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the [Parent] will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — ‘[Abba], save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. [Abba], 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.)

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

*“Don’t Miss the Omen
of Greek-Speaking Romans”*

Rev. Denoon

They weren’t Greeks.

The author of the Gospel according to John called them *Greeks*. Indeed, Paul referred to the Gentiles whom he addressed in his works, as *Greeks* also. The Acts of the Apostles refers to a certain group of people as Hellenizers. They might well be a similar group to the one we’re referring to here, because *Hellenizers* is just a fancy word for *Christians who wanted to make Christianity more accessible to Greek-speakers*.

We know that Judaism in the First Century had become a religion interesting to those who had been brought up on Roman (and Greek) paganism. Imagine, one God to guide and assist you in everything! But the one God clearly preferred a certain ethnicity, so one had to observe from the sidelines, the way our Confirmation classes observe the worship of Jews today.

But the people in question who asked to see Jesus probably weren’t actual Greeks. They were probably just non-Jews who spoke Greek.

Since the time of Alexander the Great, people throughout the Mediterranean and the lands to the east that Alexander had conquered or annexed used a Greek dialect called *Koiné* as their language for commerce. (You remember how last week I cited a professor who acknowledged that common religion helped you to trust your trade partner? Well, a common language comes in pretty handy, too.)

Probably Jewish by ethnicity and upbringing, the author of John wanted to be clear to other Christians that the people who were approaching Philip were not Jews but Gentiles... and therefore not the people whom Jesus would have been particularly disposed to approach.

In fact, they were probably Romans.

In FACT, they were probably wealthy Romans, well-placed Romans, *significant Romans*... colonizers. And they seemed to Philip to be sufficiently suspicious that, when they asked him if they could “*see Jesus*,” he was wary enough about their simple proposal to go first

to his friend Andrew. Philip didn't so much as sidle in Jesus' direction to inquire of the Rabbi whether *he* would want to "see" *them*!

"Don't miss the omen of Greek-speaking Romans," John seems to tell us.

Jesus doesn't miss the omen. When Andrew and Philip bring him the news of Gentiles wanting to "see" him, Jesus implicitly understands a few things.

First, as Matthew's gospel states from the time of the arrival of the Magi in chapter 2, John now asserts that there will be a movement of loyal Gentiles paying their respects to the Nazarene Rabbi.

Next, the disciples delivering the news to Jesus are Jewish men with Greek names. Andrew, actually "Andreas" in the Koiné of the Bible and meaning simply, "human being," approaches Jesus with Philip, literally "Philippos" (lover of horses, or significantly the name of the father of Alexander the Conqueror). The rest of Jesus' disciples in John are Simon (Shimon), James (Yaakov), John (Yohannan), Thomas (Thoma), two are named Judas (Yuda), and then also, Nathanael; and all of these names have Hebrew origins.

So, maybe at this point we're at "Don't miss the omen of Greek-speaking Romans introduced by Jews with Greek names." Pointedly, John (and Jesus also) are attuned to the notion that – from its very beginning – Christianity is going to be about the blurring of lines between people.

Because Jesus replies with a round of statements which seem at first like non-sequiturs:

- It is time for the Human One to be 'glorified.'
- Only after a grain of wheat is buried does it bear much fruit.
- Those who love their life lose it; those who hate their life keep it for eternal life.
- Those who follow me are also my servants, honored by God.

Now, it is entirely likely that any of you who are listening to me now have been reading John all your life. But even if you haven't, you know that these apparent non-sequiturs have been strung together for a reason. They actually aren't a series of un-prompted statements. What Jesus is telling Philip and Andrew here (and us who are reading it) is that he's about to die but that – as the manager of an inn where my wife and I spent a night in Scotland on our honeymoon told us about a very expensive room – "it's totally worth it." (And what I'll tell you about that room is that it totally wasn't, but the evening we spent in the bar of that inn *totally was!* The manager was a young woman from Sussex in England; the bartender was a Canadian from NewFOUNDland; there was a White South African on a study visa; and we also met a lorry driver, Dave "from Leeds." There were a couple of Scottish locals blended in, to top off the mix. The bed in our room, honestly, was just a bit too firm for comfort and begged the question of the innkeeper's assertion, but those stories and that company we met over dinner really were "totally worth it." All of us spoke something like English, Coco and me occasionally having to turn to another for something like translation. To this day, the two of us talk about that night, almost twenty-two years ago, with genuine fondness.)

Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to say to you that the glorification that we have seen in Jesus through his suffering, death, and resurrection is anything that we ought to be comparing to something as mundane as an evening in a Scottish watering hole. And for as expensive as Christ's glorification turned out to be, it is fitting for us sometimes to look at it and wonder about whether it was worth the price... whether we were worth the price.

But the world didn't end with the resurrection of Jesus, even though the first Christians appear to have thought that it would. There have been billions upon billions of human beings

who have occupied the earth since Jesus did, and there were millions and millions who went before him, and robust numbers of living creatures, planets, stars, and hidden reality along with us. So, maybe the life of God ruined, spent, and returned in the tiniest little corner of a vast universe, as a microcosm of the ordering of love in creation, really might be seen as “totally worth it.”

I’ve spent other nights with lines blurred, haven’t you? And days when human commonality really meant something, as we’ve sat together in meetings, worked together on projects, enjoyed culture in common, reveled simply in being creatures, offspring of the Source of existence we all share.

Because the omen of Greek-speaking Romans wanting to “see Jesus” and pleading with two Greek-named Jews to introduce them, isn’t ominous.

John here introduces us to the author’s understanding of the blurring of lines... lines of human demarcation entirely impotent before God... a God who can make life spring up from out of certain death. The other evangelists – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – and all the prophets would assert that this means God has won. John says it means that the glorification of Jesus has begun:

“Abba, glorify your name,” Jesus cries.

“I have glorified it, and I will do so again,” the voice from the sky replies.

Like Alexander who made the Greek language so ubiquitous around the Mediterranean that three hundred years later

- Jews were naming their children Philip and Andrew
- and colonizing Romans were speaking Greek rather than their native Latin in order to conduct commerce and government,

our God through Jesus employed and continues to employ love, to blur the lines that we have used to divide ourselves from others. Our God came – whose name itself (Yahweh, “I AM”) reminds us of the very basis of existence, which is love – came and unsaddled us who presume to make our species unique in the cosmos and greater than all others! This God, glorifying the holy Name – by suffering and dying and rising again – has caused love to win, defying divisions, tearing down walls, preventing our presumption.

And we have accepted John’s testimony, we will perpetuate the principle. We are all God’s children, God’s people, God’s creation – following and serving the One who understood truly what glory means.

We’ll pay heed to “the omen of Greek-speaking Romans” and shall live the love we have been shown and have known.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

HYMN

Now the Green Blade Rises

John M. C. Crum, ad.

Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
Wheat that in dark earth for many days has lain;
Love lives again that with the dead has been,
Love is come again like wheat that rises green.

In the grave they laid their love whom hate had slain,
Thinking that their love would never wake again;
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen,
Love is come again like wheat that rises green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,
Christ's own touch can bring us back to life again;
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been,
Love is come again like wheat that rises green.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Rev. Denoon

Joys and Concerns

Prayer of the Day

Prayer of Our Savior (Unison)

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

Phil Shoulberg

Invitation

By combining our gifts, skills, and abilities, we are enabled to do much together through our church. Your financial offerings to First Church are greatly appreciated.

Some of you are aware of our current effort to increase our giving to the agencies and institutions we support in their fulfillment of God's call upon us to seek justice and love kindness. Our goal this year is to raise \$23,000 for our Mission Partners. So far we've raised \$12,487, so there's a little way to go to reach our goal. We are asking you to open your heart and your pocketbook for our Mission Partners.

In addition, we have a Giving Store with items that are still available for purchase. The money collected from the Giving Store go to support the Minister's Discretionary Fund, used to provide assistance to individuals and families in need.

While the health crisis continues, until it is safe again to pass plates or collect in person, we will be receiving monetary offerings only by mail or online. If you are able financially, and you would like to support First Church with a monetary donation, please either send a check to:

First Congregational Church
10 West Lockwood Avenue
Webster Groves, Missouri 63119

(You can indicate to which fund you would like your donation to go by writing either "General Fund" or "Benevolence" on the memo line.)

Or go to our website—FirstChurchWG.org – and to our "Donate" page, using the pulldown menu there to direct your gift.

Thank you.

Prayer of Dedication (Unison)

God, there are many who "wish to see Jesus." Our gifts might just make the Christ visible to others. In joy and celebration of the many gifts that we share, we ask you to bless all of our offerings. This we pray, in the name of Jesus your First in all the world. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Rev. Denoon

POSTLUDE

O Sacred Head

Flor Peeters

DISMISSAL

Phil Shoulberg

That is our worship for this week at First Church. We are glad you could worship with us. Please, join us for our Virtual Coffee Fellowship, Sunday at 11 am on Zoom. The Virtual Coffee Fellowship link is on the homepage of our website.

Please, also plan to be with us this Wednesday at 7 o'clock in the evening, when we conclude our weekly Lenten series, "*Webster Groves and African America.*" This week's topic is, *Establishing Equity Today and Onward.* Join us as we consider together how much remains to be done for the sake of racial justice in our community and in our world.

This afternoon, we have something very special planned. We will gather at safe distances in our east parking lot for a filming of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. This video will be used at the start of our Palm Sunday worship service.

And here's one more reminder, inviting you to contribute to our Benevolences by mailing a check or giving electronically through our website.

As for now, our worship has ended, let our service begin.



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