



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 21 March 2021
 Sermon: Resonating
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

John 12:20-33

John 12:20-33 New Revised Standard Version

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ “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. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Soon after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we will commemorate next week with Palm Sunday, Jesus is visited in the Gospel of John by Greek believers who simply say, “We wish to see Jesus.” The English translation here actually doesn’t do justice to their request. The original Greek word for their desire to “see” Jesus doesn’t mean simply, they want to lay eyes on Jesus, or they want a visit, like

they have an appointment with Jesus, as in ‘the savior will see you now.’ The sight they request is deeper than that. This word means they want really to behold and recognize him. They want Jesus to reveal himself. They want to see God in Jesus.¹

This is why the following conversation is not just a visit between Jesus and these guests. It’s not, “Hey, how you doing?” Rather, Jesus discloses who is he to them, starting with: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be Glorified.” Then he moves to the image of the seed dying and growing; the prayer to God to “Glorify God’s name”; concluding finally with, “When I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all people to myself.” In other words, they want to see Jesus, and Jesus shows to them exactly who he is. The one who will die. The one who will be lifted up.

All week, I’ve had this evangelical praise chorus in my head. As many of you know, I grew up in a small Southern Baptist Church in Eastern North Carolina. This congregation is where I first fell in love with the Church. The youth group at that church was often a place of support for me during my teenage years. And every youth group meeting began with a series of repetitive praise choruses, with the youth minister leading us on guitar. Like I said, you may know this one. Until this week, I didn’t realize, it was straight from John, ch. 12:

Open the Eyes of My Heart Lord
Open the Eyes of My Heart

¹ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*. Sacra Pagina, Vol. 4. Ed. Daniel Harrington (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 359: “The use of the verb ‘to see’ in contexts that deal with the revelation of God in and through Jesus is particularly true for the verb *horaō*.”

*I want to See you
I want to See you
To See you High and Lifted Up
Shining in the Light of Your Glory
So Pour out your power and love
As we sing 'Holy Holy Holy'
Holy Holy Holy*

I know, I don't do the melody justice. But the song still resonates deeply in my heart so many years later. It invokes memories standing alongside my teenage friends, singing and praying together - hoping to see Jesus, to see God revealed in Jesus, in power, love, and glory. Holy Holy Holy.

Let me fill this picture out more. I fell in love with the Church at a point in my life when I needed it the most. It had always been in the background in my childhood. We started going to this particular Southern Baptist church when I was 8 years old. The Sunday services were 'fine.' Vacation Bible school, Wednesday night dinners, all well and good – but it didn't really catch my attention until, say around my middle teenage years, 14 or 15. **[Sermon Image 1]** This is a picture of me at 15, long red dyed hair, necklaces, earring. Not an especially bad looking young man if I do say so myself, but keep in mind this was Eastern North Carolina in the 90s, in a small rural town. Outside of a small group of friends, I stood out in that town; I didn't belong. In my school especially, I often felt like I was on the outside of things. I was picked-on, excluded. It didn't help that I was a straight A student, often very anxious about my grades, usually with my face in a book. Some older boys were sometimes violent with me: pushing me as I walked out of class;

hitting me hard on the shoulder as I walked by. Like it is for so many teenagers, adolescence was a hard time. It was a lonely time.

But by the grace of God, the youth minister and the youth group of this small Baptist Church in the middle of nowhere Eastern North Carolina became sources of support for me in those difficult years; they embraced me and became my community; the church became my refuge. It is where I first experienced the love of God through a community that professed the love of God.

And together, with the Greek believers of John ch. 12, we sang, “Open the Eyes of My heart Lord, I want to see you.” But, returning to this song, I’ve noticed something ‘off’ this week, going back to the original Scripture where the chorus draws its inspiration. “To see you high and lifted up,” - I always took that to mean seeing Jesus in a place of honor, lifted up above us, powerful and pure and glorious. But if you look closely, that’s not what Jesus means when he says, “When I am lifted up” in v. 32. The next verse explains that what he meant was “to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” High and lifted up is not a place of power and glory, at least not in the way I had in my mind singing that chorus some years ago. What Jesus means is, when I am lifted up on the cross, executed as a criminal by the empire.² And the glory here, as in “Shining in the light of your glory,” is not that of the pure and powerful, triumphant Jesus that I once imagined. It is the glory

² Ibid., 352-353.

of the son, rejected by the world of empire and religious hierarchy, drawing to himself all people pushed to the margins and cast aside by the world's empires.

I'm not saying that the song is wrong or bad; I'm simply saying that there was a time when I wrongly interpreted its words and the scripture that it comes from. But that wasn't an accident. Because churches often want to see only this version of Jesus, powerful, lifted up in a narrow understanding of purity and holiness, not the crucified Jesus in solidarity with all those who are rejected and pushed to the margins.

The youth group of my teenage years showed me a kind of grace and acceptance for which I will forever be grateful. Their love set me on the path I am currently on, worshiping with you today. But, it was not that way for all people. The more I got to know that church, and that denomination, and, the 'capital C' Church beyond, the more I realized there were fences set around that love, borders and exclusions set around the body of Christ. For example, I didn't know until my last year before I went away to college, that one of our youth advisors, who I had dearly loved but who had moved away some years before, had been asked to stop helping with youth group, because they disclosed to the church leadership that they were gay.

Christianity can be such a powerful source of love and inclusion, but it has also used Christ in such violent and exclusionary ways. This violence is larger than any one church or denomination. It is a part of Christianity itself, because since its

early days the Church has been wrapped up in empire, beginning with Rome, the very empire that executed Jesus itself. This week, the shame-filled and violent side of Christianity, and its links to homophobia, misogyny, and white supremacy were laid bare again for the world to see:

On Monday, following some promising and inclusive statements from Pope Francis, the Vatican ruled that Catholic Priests cannot bless same-sex unions, describing such a blessing as “not licit,” and even going so far as to say God “does not and cannot bless sin.”³ According to a recent survey, 6 out of 10 Roman Catholics support same sex marriage, and LGBTQ Catholics have come out publicly in greater numbers in recent years. Image being a gay or lesbian or trans Catholic and hearing your love or your identity called a sin by leaders of your faith? And of course, Catholics are not alone here. Numerous Protestant denominations – including in the past, the PC(USA) – have employed this same hateful vitriol toward LGBT communities, seeking to create walls of exclusion around the love of the one who said he will draw all people to himself. We should name this for what it is: discrimination disguised as theology, hate masquerading as holiness.

On Tuesday, the day after that pronouncement by the Vatican, a 21-year-old white male gunman shot and killed 8 people in Atlanta area spas. 6 of the 8 were

³ See Elisabetta Povoledo and Ruth Graham, “Vatican Says Priests Can’t Bless Same-Sex Unions.” *The New York Times*. March 15, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/world/europe/vatican-same-sex-unions.html>

Asian and 7 of the 8 were women. The gunman himself has said that the killings were not racially motivated but rather that he has a sex addiction and wanted to destroy sources of his temptation. Make no mistake about it: this is white supremacist violence supported by Christian purity culture. This is hate, deeply racist and misogynistic hate. In the past year alone, hate crimes against Asian Americans have skyrocketed in this country. And the numbers hide the enormity of verbal and physical violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders not recorded in these statistics. White evangelical Christians in this country overwhelmingly supported and continue to support our last president as he sought to distract from his own administration's deadly incompetence in containing COVID-19 by using racist names and tropes, identifying a worldwide pandemic with Asian countries and people.

But it goes deeper than that. The gunman is a longtime member of a Southern Baptist Church. Evangelical and mainline denominations for generations have taught that all but a very narrow definition of sexuality is evil and immoral, that women are a source of temptation for men, and that non-white women are especially suspect, exotic, and lascivious.⁴ These racist stereotypes have sanctioned the assault of black women, Latina women, indigenous women, Asian women, and all other Women of Color, for centuries. Don't tell me that these murders that

⁴ See Kelly Brown Douglas's description of the "Hypersexualized Black Body" in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2015), 64-68.

targeted Asian women are not racially motivated when you are steeped in a Christianity that says that just about all sex is evil and non-white women are special sources of temptation for no other reason than they are not white. This is white supremacist violence. Christianity has blood on its hands, for these brutal murders, for every act of violence it has encouraged and sanctioned, and for every believer or community it has shamed, because they don't fit in the Church's narrow box, which for countless people has become a prison, or a barrier wall, or a closet. And for many, it has been a death sentence. Everyone who claims the Christian faith has responsibility here.⁵

There's another memory that's been chewing away at me this week. It happened some years after I moved from my home church. I was a youth director at another small Baptist Church in rural North Carolina during my college years. In the memory, I'm getting into a church van full of excited youth. I have no idea how this came up, but as I'm getting in, another youth advisor, an older woman whom I dearly loved and respected, started talking about the Bible and homosexuality. I don't know what prompted her; we had never spoken of this subject in all the years I knew her. But she said something to me along these lines: "And when it comes to homosexuality, the Bible is clear. It is a sin." There was no question in her statement, but she said it to me, and looked at me. And I knew what

⁵ For further reading, see Chrissy Stroop, "Don't Discount Evangelicalism as a Factor in Racist Murder of Asian Spa Workers in Georgia." *Religion Dispatches*. March 17, 2021. <https://religiondispatches.org/dont-discount-evangelicalism-as-a-factor-in-racist-murder-of-asian-spa-workers-in-georgia/>

she said was wrong. My heart sank. And I said nothing. Nothing. Why? Was I afraid that, if I spoke up, I would lose my position? Was I scared of what others would think of me, that I would be cast outside of the love of the church, which had been so formative to me, so life giving to me, in those years? What did she think, when I was silent? What did those teenagers think, when I was silent? I am ashamed to imagine that they thought I agreed with her, or that God agreed with her. Have you ever been silent when it mattered most, or apathetic when your attention and your voice mattered most?

Grace Covenant, what we say, and what we believe, matters. We have seen again this week that what we profess as Christians and as the Church matters, in fact, it is a matter of life and death. As we near the end of our Lenten journey this year, let us draw closer to the crucified one, the one who gathers all people to himself, especially those the Church has excluded, marginalized, and oppressed in his name. Let Jesus's radical love and inclusion resonate in our souls, and let it be heard and felt beyond our church doors. For Jesus calls to us. And I want to see Jesus. We want to see Jesus. We want to see Jesus. Amen.