

Behind the pulpit here we've got some paper clips, some pens that mostly don't write, the numbers for the hymn boards, the glass thingy that goes on top of the Paschal candle if we take it outside. I haven't really added to or cleaned out this little shelf since I got here, and every church I've served has a similar collection behind a similar style pulpit, since those buildings were also either built or remodeled in the last half of the last century. But in older churches with older or more ornate furniture, you'll sometimes find a carving or a little plaque on the back of the pulpit that quotes John's gospel for today: *Sir* (back then it was mostly sirs), *we want to see Jesus*. It serves as the best reminder of our task as preachers, to proclaim the good news of God who was revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. But we do that so *you* can then go out and proclaim the good news of God who was revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. We're all in this together.

To situate us in John's story, we have skipped ahead past Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, what we'll observe next week as Palm Sunday. The religious leaders complain that they are powerless to stop the crowds, that the whole world is now following Jesus. As if to prove that they're correct, John introduces some Greeks, either members of the Jewish diaspora or converts to Judaism, who are at the temple for Passover. They approach the disciples, who are acting like Jesus' body guards, and ask to see Jesus. Philip passes the message to Andrew, Andrew and Philip pass the message to Jesus.

It's unclear whether Jesus' response is to those Greeks or only to those immediate disciples. Either way, Jesus answers the question of what it means to see him, although he does it in his typically metaphorical way. He talks about the grain of wheat falling to the earth and dying, but for the purpose of bearing fruit. Losing the old life for the sake of gaining new life is what people are going to see when they see Jesus. So far, Jesus' followers and these Greeks who want to meet him would have seen or heard about the signs that he had done. In John's gospel, those were turning water into wine, feeding the multitude, healing people, walking on water, and raising Lazarus. John calls those *signs*, not miracles, because they are done to point people to God. Now, Jesus says that the hour has come for him to be glorified, and by that, he means being lifted up on the cross, then lifted up from the grave, then lifted up into heaven. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension will point to God who gives new life.

The Greeks, the crowds, and the disciples want to be with Jesus when he is healing people, walking on water, feeding thousands, and raising the dead...not so much when he is

arrested, beaten, tried, and executed as an enemy of the state. Even most of the disciples abandon him at the end, afraid for their own lives. But Jesus knows that there is more to the story: the grain of wheat dies, but it bears much fruit. And if people want to see the real him, that's what they will see: the Son of God who did not cling to this life by political savvy, supernatural power, or any kind of force, but who faithfully lived out God's command of selfless loving service to others—even when those others turned on him or abandoned him. Yet that is not the end: Jesus' obedience to God's will, even in the face of human violence, is how the power of death is driven out of this world. Then, when Jesus is lifted up—on the cross, from the grave, and to the Father—all people will be drawn to him.

It may not seem like that prophecy has come to fruition. The fastest growing religious affiliation in this country is the nones; not *n-u-n nuns* like the Catholic ladies in habits, but *n-o-n-e nones* as in those who, when asked what religion they practice, answer *none*. In many cases that isn't from having no church experience but from having had a *negative* church experience. Yet that doesn't mean that humanity no longer yearns for the Divine. Maybe not everyone will articulate that yearning by saying *we want to see Jesus*, but Jesus promises that those who know him know God. And Jesus instructed his disciples, which includes us, on how to help people see him: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

Besides the fifth Sunday of Lent, today is also St. Patrick's Day. As the story goes, Patrick, a British teenager, was captured by pirates and enslaved in Ireland. Years later, he escaped back to Britain, trained for the priesthood, and returned to Ireland as a Christian missionary. Among other virtues, Patrick was remembered for avoiding wealth and refusing to ingratiate himself with powerful families or rulers; so he didn't enjoy the social and political protection those alliances would have afforded him when he was harassed or arrested. So the people of Ireland saw Jesus in Patrick—a former slave who still used his freedom to serve them, a missionary of God's mercy and grace to people who were sometimes hostile to him, a disciple who followed the way of Jesus in this life, however difficult, in order to show people new life in Christ.

Although we'll probably never hear people use these words, it may help us to imagine each person we meet saying to us, *We want to see Jesus*. That's the responsibility of calling ourselves Christians: whether we realize it or not, we are showing people who we think Jesus is. May God help us use this one life we have to show people the real Jesus—selfless, merciful, humble, kind, and committed to God's way of peace and justice, no matter what.