

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 5th Sunday of Lent, March 18, 2018.

We are one week away from Palm Sunday, when Jesus will enter Jerusalem to the hopes of many that he is indeed the Messiah for whom the many have been waiting for centuries. I say “many,” not “all,” because not everyone is convinced that Jesus is the one. Some even are convinced that he is not the one, while others are just not sure.

We meet some of the “not sure” folks in today’s gospel (**John 12:20-33**). They are identified as Greeks. Now, why would the author of the gospel choose to highlight Greeks, not Jews? Maybe because at the time the gospel came together – several decades after Palm Sunday – there was no certainty about who Jesus was. Clearly some people believed firmly that he had risen from the dead, thereby demonstrating that he was the Messiah. But others were not sure. They hadn’t seen the Risen Christ. They hadn’t touched him. They hadn’t been visited by him.

So, even at the time of Palm Sunday, we have a combination of certainty, disbelief and uncertainty, the “not sure” folks, the Greeks.

Remember, they, the Greeks, came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus. We are curious. We have heard stories about him, many of which we find hard to believe. We would like to know more, and we think that there is no better way of knowing more than to meet the man. Can you please take us to him?”

Philip checks with Andrew, and together they check with Jesus. “There are some curious folks here. They have heard about you and want to meet you. How would you like us to respond?”

Jesus responds quickly and engages the curious folks. And what they hear from Jesus is both comforting and troubling. No doubt causing some of the listeners to wonder if Jesus is mentally fit.

Clearly he is an interesting teacher. His story about a single grain dying in order to bear much fruit makes one think. But he is also arrogant about his relationship to

God. "Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." Really? And what about the thunder? Was it a quirk of nature, or a voice from heaven, maybe an angel speaking to him? And look at his answer. "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Who is he to say such things? Is he another Messiah imposter, or could he really be the Son of God, the One who saves?

My guess is that this desire to "see Jesus," to learn more about him, to verify his identity as the Son of God, is our desire too. No matter how many years we have been coming to church, and no matter how many times we have professed Jesus as our Lord and Savior, there remains some uncertainty about this carpenter from Nazareth. Like the Greeks, we simply would like to know more. We would like to be more confident about our allegiance. If we could just visit with him in person, we probably would have our faith confirmed.

Well, the 33-year window that was the earthly life of Jesus is long past. That's not an option for us. The Greeks in the gospel had that option, but you and I do not. So, what is the next best way to learn more about this Jesus?

Perhaps the nearest we can come to being with Jesus is to be with those who actually did meet and greet him. If not Jesus himself, then the eye-witnesses and those who learned of the resurrection from the eye-witnesses.

These accounts, so critical to learning more, are found in the New Testament. That's why we read and study these books. Some of the authors were eye-witnesses. Others learned about Jesus from the eye-witnesses.

Yet, even when we study these early accounts, we continue to want more than someone else's experience. Like the Greeks in today's gospel, we want to have our own experience with Jesus.

Fair enough. Just how do we do that more than 2,000 years later?

One method is prayer. So, let's try it. And let's not just read about prayer. Let's do prayer. We won't know if we get closer to Jesus through prayer until we try this option. Simple as that. There is testimony from those who pray that they do

feel closer to Jesus. But there are also some who conclude the opposite. The solution is to find out for ourselves.

Jesus knew that lots of people had questions, had doubts, weren't sure who he was. And what did Jesus say to these folks? He put on his teacher hat, and said, "This is how you pray: 'Our Father, who art in heaven.'" He taught us how to pray, not to introduce us to some ancient ritual, but to give us the tools to reach him.

Now, we know people who have tried this method and not found it to be the answer. Their experience is that prayer doesn't seem to work. Well, what does "not work" really mean? Did we put Jesus to a test, and he failed? Did we expect a certain outcome and not get it?

In this morning's lesson from the Letter to the Hebrews (**Hebrews 5:5-10**) is this verse: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."

"Reverent submission." Maybe this is the missing element in unsuccessful prayer. We simply don't believe that it will work. We enter the exercise filled with doubt rather than faith. We don't practice "reverent submission." And because we are not submitting, we leave no room for success. Our uncertainty, our extreme caution, is like a valve that is shut, not by God, but by us.

Can God overcome our doubt? Can He open that valve on His own? Oh yes, there is plenty of evidence in the Bible of God doing exactly that. Thomas, for example, overcame his doubt by poking his finger in the wound of the Risen Christ. But that happened only because Thomas was in the room with Jesus. He, Thomas, made himself available. He submitted. Then Jesus responded. Then Thomas believed.

Maybe the key to getting closer to Jesus is for us to take a trusting step forward and then wait patiently for Jesus to respond. Divine communication takes many forms. So we must not limit ourselves to an audible response. And that Divine response, audible or not, only has to work once for people to want more. We're here because "reverent submission" worked for us at least once, and we want

more. And, if we give more, we find ourselves in conversation. And it's that conversation that we call prayer.

Just ask the prophet Jeremiah (**Jeremiah 31:31-34**). "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." Prayer is tapping into the love of God that is present in all of us. Sometimes God will tap us, and other times we will tap God. What we are promised is that when this exchange happens – tap tap/tap tap – conviction follows. Our curiosity doesn't end. We always want to know more. But we find that our curiosity is now on much more solid ground. We trust reverently.

So, good for the Greeks for asking to see Jesus. Good for Philip and Andrew for checking with Jesus. Good for Jesus for agreeing to meet the curious. And good for you and me for reverently opening ourselves to the possibility that when we pray "Our Father, who art in heaven," our Father responds, "Welcome, what's on your mind today?"

Amen.