Sacrificial Living Peace Presbyterian Church

John 12:20-33 5th Sunday in Lent

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Sacrificial living is not a popular concept in today’s culture. We are all about self-satisfaction, self-actualization, self-fulfillment. And yet, there are so many unhappy people out there, feeling dissatisfied. Rates of teen and young adult depression and hopelessness have increased. Adults are also feeling great dissatisfaction with life, and the pressures of housing costs and groceries can be hard, and we live with too much isolation from one another, and a lot is being written about the negative effects of social media on our psyches, especially the minds of teens. Yet we have a higher standard of living and more comforts than ever before. We occupy more square-footage in our houses or apartments, we expect more entertainment, and we enjoy more services of comfort and ease, like eating out, carwashes, lawn services, pet groomers, nail salons, and gym and yoga memberships than ever before. Sometimes it makes you wonder if we are too comfortable. I sometimes look at myself and then compare my comforts to those who live in the violent ravaged and poor countries of Ukraine, Gaza, South Sudan, or Haiti. I even imagine what it feels like to live really poor in Bradenton or Miami, or New York, or rural N. Carolina where I was raised. Perhaps it is not healthy to make comparisons, but we do it a lot. It’s just that most of us compare up instead of down. We compare to wealthy people or people who have a lot of followers on social media.

Today’s reading from John comes immediately after Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, which means he is headed toward his rejection, arrest, and ultimately his death. Have you ever had someone like a parent or grandparent warn you that they are going to die? Here in today’s passage he is warning his disciples, preparing them for the inevitable. He is also acknowledging his own feelings. He says that his soul is troubled. He ponders whether he could ask to be saved from this hour? From this moment of huge personal sacrifice, he would like to be freed, yet he encourages himself. Then he hears from heaven confirming that this is his purpose, this is a sacrifice worth making, in order to glorify God.

*Lord, as we hear Jesus struggling with his life’s purpose today and mustering the courage, help us to see the purpose of our sacrificial living. Speak to us by your word and help us to embrace your world-changing truth.*

***John 12:20-33 (NRSVue)*** ***– Sacrificial Living***

**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.

Those of you who attended the Ash Wednesday service at the start of Lent thirty-two days ago may remember that as we entered, we stopped to pondered the marigold flowers (as Kelly showed the kids today). Dead flowers, full of seeds. That’s so easy to see with flowers. Harder to embrace with people. We don’t like to see people die. And yet, there are seeds when people die. There are not just seeds of hope in the resurrection that get scattered, even among those who say they do not believe. But there are seeds of grace when people gather around a bedside to show their love. When they send cards to express appreciation for a life well-lived. When people who sometimes have taken one another for granted, begin to comprehend the power of their deep connection by how lost they feel when the other slips away into eternity, into the unknown and unseen and untouchable. It is hard, but there are seeds of growth.

Jesus heard a clear voice from the heavens, much as people who are dying often hear voices of God or of family members reassuring them. The crowd around him said it was thunder or an angel. Jesus says the voice is for them. Just this week, I heard a family member describe hearing voices like this. These voices are for us, helping us to believe that this life is not all there is. If this life, what we can see, is all there is, then why live a life of sacrifice? No, seems like you might just serve yourself. But those who see that there is more, know that our lives are more complete as we live like the one who saves us, Jesus. As we pour out our lives in service to others, then we are really living a meaningful life. Did you hear about Dr. Ruth Gottesmann, professor of pediatrics and widow of a successful investor on Wall Street, who gave a one billion dollar gift to the Albert Einstein Medical School in the Bronx, so that no student will ever again have to pay tuition again, there in the poorest part of the City? Sacrificial giving – making a world of difference for so many. Are you giving sacrificially of both your time and your money to Peace to make a world of difference for someone?

As a mother to four, mother-in-law to two, grandmother three soon, as a wife to Richard for thirty-nine years, as a daughter and sister, and as a pastor to three congregations over 34 years, totaling more than a thousand significant relationships over time, I honestly say and maybe you can too, that the sacrificial love makes living worthwhile. Sometimes it is not fun in the moment to be bone tired and have a sick or frustrated child who needs your attention. Sometimes it is not fun in the moment to have worked twelve hours a day for six straight days and find that you need to see someone in the hospital or visit the family of someone who died or talk on the phone to someone who is troubled. Yet, despite the hardship and maybe because of it, I find it is the investment in the faith, hope, love, joy, peace of others that is so meaningful. This is what makes living worthwhile.

Now to Jesus’ final words, because I think it is really interesting that when he says, “Now is the judgment of this world” he then seems to associate that judgment with the ruler of this world being driven out. In other words, the judgment is that God wins instead of evil. The judgment is this: *Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death.*  Those are the words of Desmond Tutu of South Africa. Think of his modern day struggle. And Tertullian of 3rd Century, from Northern Africa, who lived through the martyrdom of Christians, said that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. And let us not forget how Jesus ends this section. He says that when he is lifted up (now remember that means in John lifted up on the cross, as we sang earlier and it can mean lifted up as in raised from the dead, and lifted up as he was when 40 days after his resurrection, when he ascended into heaven. And Hannah of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures and Mary, the Mother of our Lord, said that those who are pushed down, lowly, will be lifted up by God.

I want to end with a story of St. Patrick as a teenager. I hope that some of you teens will hear this story that is 1500 years old and be inspired to do something bold and courageously good like Patrick did. He was living with his family in Britain and was sixteen years old when Irish raiders took him from there into slavery in Ireland. (I do not wish that upon anyone) For six years, from 16-22, he was depressed, working as a slave, caring for animals, but this difficult time made him turn to his faith, the faith into which he had been raised. He eventually had the courage, based on a dream from God, to escape this slavery and jump on a ship to get back to family in Britain. While on the way, he almost starved to death, but after reuniting and getting stronger, he had another vision telling him that he needed to return to Ireland to share God’s love with them. Can you imagine choosing to go back to the horrible place when you had been a slave? It was a very hard decision, but Patrick went. Many people heard of God’s love and became Christians in Ireland, thanks to Patrick’s courageous faith and sacrificial living. In fact, you may have thought Patrick was an Irish man. He was not. No, his family was Roman. He grew up in Britain, and he gave himself to the people of Ireland, out of sacrificial love, because God called him. What will God call you to do in sacrificial living? At the very least, you are called to be a willing servant of Christ by your caring attention to the needs of others. Caring for the needs of others – that’s how Peace’s Mission Statement ends.