

Gospel & Sermon March 17, 2024

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“God alters our understanding of glory.”



*What does glory look like? As Jesus draws us to himself, he draws us away from our personal definitions of glory. He invites us to imagine what the salvation of the world looks like. But the glory Jesus talks about does not look like individuals winning. Glory looks like love winning. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” That’s what Jesus will tell his disciples on the evening of his betrayal. Glory looks like sacrificial love.*

**Gospel: John 12:20-33**

Now 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 Son of Man 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 Father will honor.”

“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. Father, 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.

**Sermon by Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone**  
**“God alters our understanding of glory.”**

What does glory look like? Last weekend at the Oscars, glory looked like a red carpet, fancy dresses, and gold statues. For a politician, it might look like balloons, streamers, confetti, and - most important - the win and the power that comes with it. For an athlete, it might look like a trophy, a champagne-drenched locker-room celebration, and a parade.

In the ancient world, glory might look like a grand procession celebrating a military victory. A conquering general rides into town in a horse-drawn chariot, surrounded by war heroes and musicians. Captives in chains on display, maybe even the conquered king, if he was still alive.

Jesus rode into town on a donkey.

In John’s gospel, that just happened, even though we won’t hear the story until next week, on Palm Sunday. Today, we hear about glory. For Jesus, glory is not going to look like trophies and streamers and teary - or shouty - acceptance speeches. For Jesus, glory is going to look a lot different. And that means for followers of Jesus, glory is going to look a lot different.

It’s not going to look like glory at all.

During this season of Lent, or maybe on Good Friday, we sing: “In the cross of Christ I glory.” But for Jesus’ first followers, the cross was not a symbol of glory. It was a symbol of suffering and humiliation. The cross was how Rome executed rebels. And because those executions happened publicly, the cross was how Rome deterred other, would-be rebels.

To die on a cross was not to die with honor. To be lifted up on a cross was not to be lifted up in glory. Crucifixion was a humiliating, shameful death.

But Jesus transforms our understanding of the cross. He alters our understanding of glory.

Glory does not look like one performer or politician or party winning. It does not look like one team winning. It does not even look like one nation winning. Well, it might look like that at first. For political and religious leaders who wanted to maintain order, maintain their positions and power, and above all not draw the wrong kind of attention from the Roman military – for those folks, lifting Jesus up on the cross looks like a win.

But the glory Jesus talks about does not look like individuals winning. Glory looks like love winning. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” That’s what Jesus will tell his disciples on the evening of his betrayal. Glory looks like sacrificial love.

Jesus has taught his disciples the way of love. And on that evening he will show them the kind of love he calls them to practice: Jesus - God in the flesh, the Creator of the universe - will humble himself, take the role of a servant, and wash their feet. And he will command them: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

That love will not be extinguished. That way of love will be vindicated. Because Jesus is not just lifted up on the cross. Jesus will be lifted up to life, and lifted up to the Father’s presence. Still today, glory looks like love winning - even if the world cannot see it.

Indeed, glory may seem to go into hiding: Into death, then into a tomb - or into the ground. This is so counter to our human experiences of glory, that Jesus has to give us an illustration that we can understand: A grain of wheat. A seed. You can hang on to a seed. You can even cherish it. You can seal it up in resin and wear it as a charm or keep it on your keychain. But then it will never be more than a seed.

But if you bury it - if you hide it under the ground for a little while - eventually you will have fruit or vegetables or grain. Nourishment for a hungry world. And it all comes not from holding on, but from letting go. Glory does not require guarding what we have and accumulating even more. It is not about defending our titles or holding onto our positions or reclaiming power over others.

But glory in this world requires a winner. And having a winner requires a loser. At first glance, the cross is a sign of losing. But God’s glory does not require the designation of winners and losers. Jesus, when he is lifted up, will draw all people to himself. Saints and sinners, worldly winners and losers.

Remember those words we heard last week: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Even now, the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus is living and drawing all people to himself. Some will resist, of course. Sometimes - maybe a lot of times - we will resist, too.

Because as Jesus draws us to himself, he draws us away from our personal definitions of glory. He keeps on drawing us out of our comfort zones.

Jesus draws us out of our narrow, personalized understandings of the cross and salvation. He invites us to imagine what the salvation of the world looks like. He invites us to imagine the renewal and reconciliation of all things.

And he draws us out of our comfort zones to participate in the renewal and reconciliation of all things. Yes, he draws us together in beautiful sanctuaries for worship, praise, and nourishment. But he also draws us to places we’d rather avoid: places of pain and suffering, places of hunger and poverty, places that we would not consider glorious at all.

Places like the cross. Whoever serves him, must follow him. That is how we get to experience glory. The glory of a love that draws in and transforms the brokenness of the world. The glory of a love that defeats death. The glory of a love so big that it extends to all the world and even into eternity.

But in order to experience that glory, we must let go of those specters of glory that the world encourages us to hold onto. We might not be athletes or actors or famous in any way. But we have our own trophies: trophies like titles or power over others, even if it’s just power over a few others. We grasp onto trophies of being right, or at least being better than. And we must hold those trophies more loosely, or even dare to let them go.

As the season of Lent brings us closer and closer to the cross, what might God be calling us to let go? What false notions of glory might we need to drop, so that we can fully experience the glory of sacrificial love? So that our hands and minds and hearts can be open to receive that love and carry it into the world.

**Pastor Jaime**

*Presented March 17, 2024 at Bethel Lutheran Church in Muskego, WI USA*

*©2024 Jaime Larson-McLoone*