

## A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*The Hour of the Cross*

John 12

March 17, 2024

On this fifth Sunday in Lent, the gospel of John draws our attention to a curious detail: some Greeks who are in Jerusalem came to one of the disciples, Phillip, and said to him, “We wish to see Jesus.” There are many people in the holy city where Jesus has come for the last time. There are many people there for Passover. There are those in the crowds who have welcomed Jesus as the messenger of the Lord. There are the high priests and leaders of the people who want to eliminate him because they consider him a heretic and a danger. There are the government officers and soldiers who fear him amongst the crowds teeming around. In the city are men and women, boys and girls, fat people and thin people, healthy people and sick people, tall and short, happy and sad, rich and poor, faith-filled, and cynical, intellectuals and simple, scholars and farmers. There are also people like those Greeks who are curious to see Jesus who has caused quite a stir.

“We wish to see Jesus.” These words, like so many others in the gospel, go beyond this particular episode and express something universal and go beyond the literal to express something spiritual. To see or not see in John’s gospel is critical. The whole gospel breaks down between those who see and those who do not see, and the similar frames of night and day, dark and light, disbelief and belief. There are lots of people who see in the gospel, like Phillip and Nathanael in chapter 1, the woman at the well in chapter 6, and a blind man given sight in chapter 9. And there are a lot of people who don’t see like Nicodemus who comes confused to Jesus at night and religious leaders who refuse to see what is right in front of their eyes.

This is the only time someone says, “I want to see.” And its foreigners who say it. It’s foreigners who say, “We want to see,” which suggests on a deeper level: I want to believe and to follow Jesus. Their words reveal a desire that passes through ages and cultures of those who have heard of Jesus but not encountered him. There are people all over the world who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel and to see the ministry of Jesus. And let’s be sure to acknowledge, it’s not just isolated individuals in remote tribes; it’s also overworked, lonely dwellers of affluent western cities, and, to be sure, it includes people who live in a so-called Christian nation dripping with the saccharine goo of cultural religion, but who can’t for the life of them, think of when they actually saw Jesus.

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century British missionary Leslie Newbigin went all around the world for Jesus and then came back home to realize the cultural artifacts of Christianity don’t replace a living, vibrant relationship with him. Educated at Cambridge University where he converted to Christianity, he was a devoted, thoughtful, gentle herald of the gospel and witness to it for 40 years in remote villages and sprawling cities in India and then came back home to a post-Christendom England. One thing Newbigin became convinced of soon upon returning

home is that Britain needed a true missionary effort just as much or more than remote villages in India. Britain with a church on every corner and a parish register for every baby, had become just as blind to the true faith of Jesus as any heart of darkness elsewhere in the world.

He saw the need for what Jeremiah describes as a covenant with God written on the heart, not just written on church signs or blazoned on billboards. The world needs and desires a faith of the heart. A faith burning in Jeremiah's bones; a faith that brought the psalmist to his knees in confession, and a prayer for the renewal of the joy of our salvation.

And Newbigin came to believe that the one way the world would know the gospel is through the life and ministry of local congregations: the ordinary, beautiful, sometimes hard, life of Christians together within congregations. This is the witness to the gospel of Christ.

We see a model of this in our reading today, as Greeks come to Phillip who goes and gets Andrew, and together, they go to Jesus. No one is singular here. Everyone is with others. The Greeks are plural. Phillip and Andrew are a team. Jesus is united with the world in his spirit and his intentions. The whole city is teeming with festive energy, but the real drama is taking place as disciples welcome foreigners to the community of Christ.

We notice in the story that the foreigners, the Greeks, who wish to see Jesus don't go directly to Jesus, but they go to his disciples. This reveals an Easter truth in the heart of Lent. If the world will come to see and know, follow, and love Jesus, they will do so through the witness of his followers. The church is not salvation in and of itself, but the church's mission is to see and know and help others see and know Jesus. This is a high calling, a sobering one, but it is one that is on each of us together.

Newbigin wrote: "The primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? ... The only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it." (*Gospel in Pluralist Society*)

"It is in the local congregation that the credibility of the gospel becomes apparent, for that is the place where a real community of men and women, of young and old, of stranger and friend, are gathered into the reconciled fellowship of the body of Christ, hear the declaration that their sins are forgiven, and feast together at the table of the Lord" (Murry Rae, "The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel")

Newbigin identifies six characteristics for what should be true about such a community living in the light of the gospel:

1. It will be a community of praise in a world of doubt and skepticism.

2. It will be a community of truth in a pluralistic society that overwhelms and produces relativism.
3. It will be a selfless community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood in a selfish world.
4. It will be a community prepared to live out the gospel in public life in a world that privatizes all religious claims.
5. It will be a community of mutual responsibility in a world of individualism.
6. It will be a community of hope in a world of pessimism and despair about the future.

This community imagined as a herald and witness to the gospel is a community of praise and truth, one that lives for others, one that lives out the gospel in public, one that is a community of mutual responsibility, and one that bears hope in the world. If you ask me how I have seen Jesus, if I reflect on the question, it seems that every time I believe I have caught a glimpse of him, it is through faithful people living out one or more of these commitments.

- I have seen Jesus in hospitals and nursing homes in the praise of people who are suffering in their final days in this life but whose trust is still in God. I'm thinking of moments with beloved friends who have passed from this life.
- I have seen Jesus in the classrooms of some of the smartest people I know who have thought deeply about their faith and can articulate their faith and reasons for it. I'm thinking of my Sunday school teacher in college at 1<sup>st</sup> Baptist Church College Station.
- I have seen Jesus in the selflessness of those who serve in some of the world's most desolate places and pray tirelessly in some of the world's most isolated places. I'm thinking of congregations who support missionaries around the world, and I'm thinking of congregations whose courage lit the fire of the civil rights movement at great cost to themselves.
- I have seen Jesus in the shared life of those who are able to see the little work they do as taking part in something much bigger than they are. I'm thinking of a little congregation in rural North Carolina who started offering English classes for migrant farm workers and ended up as a tri-lingual congregation with migrant workers and refugees from Vietnam.

I believe I've seen Jesus live in the lives and embodied in the communities that I've had the grace to be a part, and I pray this is true for you as well.

I do think Newbigin missed one important characteristic, one maybe he intended within the others, but I want to make more explicit. I have seen Jesus in the congregations of people forgive those who have hurt them. I'm thinking of the brothers and sisters of Mother Emmanuel in Charleston, South Carolina, after their unspeakable tragedy and others like them. Because where there is forgiveness, there is Jesus.

There is always a cost for being part of a community of grace. Jesus says a grain of wheat must fall to the earth and die, and when it does it produces fruit. He is speaking of a deep and universal truth, something within us must die if we are to bear witness to the one who gave his life for the world. Our whole selves even, we must die to self, that Christ may live within us.

There was something about the arrival of the Greeks that stirred Jesus. His soul was troubled. In the gospel, Jesus gives signs to other people signs of the kingdom—like water into wine, feeding the 5000, and raising Lazarus, all signs given by Jesus to others. But here he doesn't give a sign to the world. The arrival of the Greeks was a sign that he interpreted: the hour has come.

I suppose their arrival signaled a fulfillment of his mission—that the whole world would come to God through him. It seems to cross his mind that maybe his mission could be accomplished without the cross after all. After all, here they come. But if the cross-less thought does cross his mind—and how could it not? —the idea is quickly banished. He has clarity about his purpose and destiny. It is the hour of the Cross. It is the time for the defeat of Satan, the prince of evil, and the definitive triumph of the merciful love of God. Christ declares he will be lifted up from the earth, lifted because he is crucified and lifted because he is exalted by the Father in the Resurrection, to draw everyone to him and to reconcile humankind with God and among themselves.

The sign of the cross is still all around us, in our worship and in symbolic form in homes and on necklaces everywhere you look. Yet, still, the way the world sees Jesus today is not through symbols around them we wear or splash on billboards, but through the presence and ministry of the congregation of Christ with them. You are the cross bearers, you are the body of Christ, you are the visible means of the gospel today. You are the visible means of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through you. In these last Lenten days, as we come to the table of our Lord, as the shadow of the cross begins to fall, let us be renewed in the joy of our salvation, and in the shared life of the Spirit within and among us, that we may bear witness to the living Christ and to the power of the cross to save the world.

Amen.

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