

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

Hebrews 5: 12-14

John 12:20-33

Sermon for 3/21/21

ALL PEOPLE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algo

Summary: They all shall know me.

The Gospel of John was written twenty or thirty years after the other gospels, and in writing his gospel, John was clearly not simply going again over the material already covered by Matthew, Mark and Luke. As an old man, John was instead intent on organizing the teaching and events of Christ's ministry in such a way as to lay before us his conclusions, after a lifetime of reflection, about the principles of the Good News, about what it all means rather than simply what happened. As we said a couple of weeks back, quoting a great Bible scholar of the past, John was interested not so much in the facts, but rather in the truth those facts convey.

As a result, we find the episodes in his gospel organized in such a way as to bring out those truths, and to represent them in a way that carries the reader forward from one great truth to the next, each one amplifying and expanding and clarifying what has gone before.

A few weeks back, I mentioned my new favorite TV show, Bob Ross's THE JOY OF PAINTING, in which the shaggy-haired and extremely soft-spoken Bob Ross completes an entire landscape painting, from start to finish, in each half hour episode. I think we can find in Bob's painting a helpful analogy to John's writing.

Bob always begins by roughly filling in the background of the painting – usually distant skies and mountains – and then gradually, working down from the top of the canvas as he fills in the foreground. Layer after layer he brings the painting closer and closer to us: the foothills of the mountains, the trees and streams, with each layer having a greater clarity than the last. Often he concludes by painting an old shack or cabin, so that the final effect is of this weather-beaten little building with the whole landscape rising behind it, and fading into the distance.

One of the secrets of painting that Bob often shares is that in each subsequent layer of the painting, he uses darker and darker paint, and the elements being depicted

become sharper and more detailed, so that the final effect is that the foreground elements, the final elements being painted, offer much greater clarity, contain more visual information, we might say, than the earlier elements, and in this way he duplicates the way we see things with our eyes in the real world.

It's not a perfect analogy, of course, but I think it's a helpful way of reading John's Gospel, and seeing how he uses his literary art to bring us closer and closer to the final great truths of the Gospel of Christ.

Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent, and we are now very close to the end of our Lenten journey, with the final fateful events of the Gospel story soon to be added, like the final foreground representations in John's great painting. And in today's gospel reading we find John arriving at some of the great and central elements of that literary painting: the extension of the Good News beyond the borders of the Jewish nation to the whole world. So let's read it together.

John 12: 20-33.

This passage is very carefully and deliberately constructed, almost like a poem. It begins with some Greeks, some non-Jews, who have come to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover festival, the same Passover holiday that will conclude with Christ's crucifixion. They are eager to meet Jesus, presumably to learn directly from him more about this startling new message he has been spreading among the Jews.

It's interesting to stop and think for a moment about why they would have wanted to hear from this young rabbi, an obscure young preacher in a backwater country so distant from their own country. How would they even have heard about him in the first place?

We don't know for sure, but we do remember that, according to the other Gospel writers, Jesus had cleaned the temple in Jerusalem only a day or two earlier. And what part of the temple had that happened in? In the outer court of the temple, where the money changers and animal merchants were plying their trade. That outer court was the farthest court from the Temple itself, separated from it by a wall. The court was called the Temple of the Gentiles, because it was the only court which allowed Gentiles into it. Beyond that wall, no one except Jews were allowed to enter, on penalty of death.

It is certainly plausible, isn't it?, that those Greeks had been in that outer court when Jesus entered it, took a whip, and drove those money changers and merchants

out. Surely that would explain their curiosity, and their desire to learn more about this extraordinary young rabbi.

In any event, they sought him out, as John tells us at the beginning of his account of the episode. And then, in John's telling of it, Jesus says some remarkable things about a dying seed being buried in the ground, and the glorification of the Son of Man, and then concludes the episode in this way:

12:31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

12:33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Let's pause again for a moment, and think about an interesting fact about the spoken language. What I'm referring to is how the same words can convey very different meaning, depending on how the words are emphasized.

Consider a simple English sentence like: Where are you? A different meaning emerges, depending on which word you emphasize.

Where are you? Expresses surprise at the person's location.

Where **are** you? Expresses concern about the person's well-being.

Where are **you**? Contrasts the person with someone else's location.

Our passage from John begins by introducing some Greeks – representing the non-Jewish world – then has Jesus saying that he is about to be glorified, and that his death will be the seed that bears fruit, and concludes with the announcement that he will draw all men to himself.

Had we been there I believe we would have heard Jesus emphasize the word **all**. Standing in front of a group of exiles who had come to learn more about him, probably to learn whether his strange new teaching had any application to themselves, we can imagine Jesus informing them of what is about to happen there in Jerusalem, and what it will mean for them, and by implication, for the whole world: I will draw **all** men to myself.

Did this episode occur exactly as John reports it? When and where he reports it?

Maybe or maybe not. But the point is that, as he nears the end of his Gospel account, John is filling in the foreground of his painting, bringing to clarity the

deep meaning and momentous implications of the life and actions and words of Christ.

In today's passage, John is informing the reader that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of Jesus Christ, is intended for everyone and is about everyone. It is addressed both to the Jew and the Gentile, and what it is telling them is that all of them, every single one of them, will be drawn to Christ, will be saved.

And that has a particular relevance for this church, doesn't it? From our pulpit, we preach the universal reconciliation of everyone to God through the ministry of Jesus Christ. We believe that Isaiah prophesied in truth and in the Spirit of Christ when he wrote:

*6 On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for **all** peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
7 On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds **all** peoples,
the sheet that covers **all** nations;
8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from **all** faces (Is. 25)*

We believe John the Baptist spoke the truth when he said: *Behold, the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the **whole** world.*”

We believe the apostle Paul, when he wrote *“as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall **all** be made whole.”* (1 Cor. 15)

And finally, and most importantly, we believe Jesus when he said, on whatever occasion he said it, that he will draw all people – that is, **all** people – to himself.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that you lift the shroud that still enfolds so many, that you open the eyes of those still blind to your love for us while we are still sinners, that you open our hearts to the unthinkable magnitude of Your mercy, that you restore our faith in the full and final and complete victory over sin and death by the Lamb of God, our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray.