

The Way of Meaning

John 12:20-33

Introduction

One of the top movies in 1994 – and one that continues to run frequently on those channels that specialize in classic movies – starred Tom Hanks in the role of Forest Gump. You have probably seen the movie ... but just in case the plot of that movie goes something like this:

While sitting at a bus stop in Savannah, a man named Forest Gump recounts his life story to the strangers who sit next to him on the bench. Forest is an endearing character complete with a few mental shortcomings who nonetheless demonstrates complete devotion to his loved ones and duties. As a result, his uniqueness brings him into many life-changing situations. Along the way, he encounters many historical figures and events throughout his life.

From the earliest story in 1951 where he teaches a young Elvis Presley how to dance to 1981 when he finally reunites with his girlfriend Jenny, Forest always seems to be at the key events in history. No matter what was going on or where it was, if something big was happening, Forest Gump was there.

The Greeks in today's gospel text have that same Forest Gump quality about them. By nature, the Greeks were a people driven by the desire to learn something new.

- They were constantly on a quest for more knowledge, because – they thought – the more you know, the more godlike you would be.
- No matter where it was, if something big was going on, they were always there.
- So it is not surprising to find a group of Greeks hanging out in Jerusalem during the Jewish Passover.

This story in our text is set during the last week of the earthly life of Jesus, probably on Monday ... Tuesday at the latest. Jesus was making a lot of headlines during these days.

- In the verses that immediately precede the Scripture passage I read you will find the account of the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday. (We celebrate that next Sunday.)
- And before that was the story of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.
- And, of course, don't forget that Jesus cleared out the Temple on Sunday evening.
- These three events alone would prompt any person searching for knowledge to look for Jesus, even if you had never heard about the feeding of the 5,000 or the walking on water miracle!

Clearly, they could learn something new from this intriguing Jewish Rabbi. So boldly, maybe presumptuously, they found the disciple with the Greek-sounding name – Philip – and told him they wanted to see this man named Jesus.

Sir, we would like to see Jesus." (John 12:21)

As you know our Lenten theme this year is:

THE WAY

And you know, we are building these sermons around a single verse of Scripture:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Today the way of Jesus leads us to THE WAY OF MEANING.

- I debated a long time about what to title this sermon. Is it about being fruitful? (That was my first option.)
- Ultimately, I decided this was a text about how your life can have meaning and purpose.

Jesus provides two lessons in this text that talk about how your life can have meaning if you walk in THE WAY:

LESSON #1: IN ORDER TO LIVE YOU HAVE TO DIE

Verse 24 reads:

Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. (John 12:24)

For people in the earthly kingdom, that teaching makes no sense. In the earthly kingdom dying happens after life. You are born, you live and then you die. But that is not the sequence in the Kingdom of God. In God's Kingdom you have to die before you can ever live.

A farmer reads verse 24 and immediately understands it. Unless the seed dies it will never live.

We are growing closer and closer to the day when volunteers begin to plant the Grace garden. Soon hundreds of seeds will be planted into the 11,000 square feet of garden space on the north side of this property. Beneath the soil those seeds will die, and their death will result in a new life of sweet corn and beans and all those other vegetables you look forward to cooking in the months ahead.

On the broadest scale, Jesus is talking about Himself in this passage. In a matter of three or four days Jesus will die on the cross, and because He dies every one of us can have eternal life. He dies. Remember the central verse in last week's sermon:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

He dies. We live. If He doesn't die, we will not live.

But as you begin to narrow the focus, you see that this teaching applies to your own life as well. That is where the contrast is most clearly seen. In the earthly kingdom we are taught to “live for self.” In God’s Kingdom we are taught to “die to self.”

People who “die to self” understand that God created them for a reason. We know that we are a part of God’s plan for the world. Dying means we take our priorities, our desires, our opinions and we lay them down at the foot of the cross in order to be and do what God calls us to be and do. It’s not about ME; it is about CHRIST IN ME.

That’s what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote these words to the Philippian Christians:

For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Phil 1:21).

The great challenge for many people is how try to live in both the earthly kingdom and the heavenly one. The answer is “You can’t” because dying happens at the opposite end of the spectrum. Only by dying-to-self up front can you live in the Kingdom of God. And it is through dying – dying to self, dying to sin – that your life gains genuine meaning and purpose.

That brings us to lesson #2:

LESSON #2: IN ORDER TO BE GREAT YOU HAVE TO SERVE

Hear again the words in verse 26:

Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. (John 12:26)

Once again Jesus turns the teachings of the earthly kingdom completely upside down. The top is at the bottom. Honor goes to the one willing to follow and serve.

Nothing in this earthly kingdom comes close to teaching that.

Let me tell you the story of a little girl named Sarah. One Sunday, Sarah’s Sunday School teacher prepared a lesson on being serving God with what you have. Following the lesson, Sarah spoke up. “What can I do?” she asked.

The teacher had not anticipated that question, but she quickly looked around and spotted an empty flower vase on the windowsill. “Sarah,” she said, “you can bring in a flower and put it in the vase. That would be a wonderful thing. It would bring a smile to my face and to God’s face every time we looked at.”

Sarah frowned. “But that’s not something important,” she said. “Oh, but it is,” her teacher responded. “It is always important if you are helping someone by doing it.”

Sure enough, the next Sunday Sarah brought in a dandelion and placed it in the vase. In fact, she continued to do so each week. Without reminders or help, she made sure the vase was filled with a bright yellow flower, Sunday after Sunday. When her pastor found out about it, he moved the vase into the sanctuary and placed it next to the pulpit. That Sunday he gave a sermon on the honor of serving others, using Sarah's vase as an example. The congregation was touched by the message, and many people made commitments that day to find a way to serve God quietly and simply.

But the upbeat trend was not to continue. Four days later Sarah was diagnosed with leukemia. The doctors told her parents that nothing could be done to save her life. Sarah continued to attend church, every week, bringing a new dandelion with her. Prior to the service, she would walk down the aisle and put the dandelion into the vase. The people of the church arrived early because they didn't want to miss that special moment. They started to visit her. They took her cookies. They read books to her. More importantly, they fell in love with this special little girl who just wanted to serve Jesus.

Eventually, Sarah became confined to bed. She lost her smile. She lost most of her weight. The disease was taking its toll. And then that horrible day came when Sarah's family was told the end was very near. Sarah would be with them for less than a week.

The Sunday morning after the family was given that news, as the pastor was preaching his sermon, he suddenly stopped speaking in mid-sentence. He stood frozen behind the pulpit. His eyes were wide open. And he stared in disbelief at the back of the church. Everyone turned to see what he was looking at. It was Sarah! Her parents had brought her for one last visit. She was bundled in a blanket, and seated in a wheelchair. And ... she was holding a dandelion in her hand.

The congregation didn't make a sound as Sarah's father slowly pushed her wheelchair to the front of the church where her vase was still perched by the pulpit. She struggled – oh, did she struggle – but she managed to pull herself out of her chair and gently placed her flower in the vase... one last time. No one noticed that Sarah also laid a piece of paper down right beside that vase. Then her parents quietly wheeled her out of the sanctuary and took her home.

Four days later, Sarah died. It was during her funeral service that her pastor first noticed the piece of paper. He opened it, and shared what was written to the packed sanctuary. The note simply said, "Dear God, Thank you for this vase. I love you. Sarah."

You see, it's not the acts of valor and courage that change our world. It is the simple acts of ordinary people who choose to follow Jesus by serving the people around them.

APPLICATION

Jesus came to teach us a new way of living. He taught us about a WAY that was so radically different from every other way this world can offer. The WAYS of this world emphasize:

- Amassing toys and possessions

- Finding pleasure
- Doing what makes us happy
- Acquiring power
- Being right
- Knowing the answer to everything

And if we can accomplish all that we will say "This is a GOOD WAY."

But Jesus says to those who think that way ... You don't know what real life is. He says:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

How would you describe your life? Has it involved dying and serving? If not, you are not really living! It is only by doing those things that you can know what it truly means to live.

Let's pray ... Amen.