



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, life-giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our gospel this morning kicks off like a scene out of that old HBO show, Entourage. And if you didn't see it, it's about an actor who's just made Hollywood's a-list, right? And he's thrust into the whole LA celebrity culture, the glitterati, all of that. But fortunately for him, he's surrounded by a posse of childhood friends from back home in Queens, and they have his back. They watch out for him. They do their best to protect him from the paparazzi and all the drama that comes with fame.

Well, that was the image that came to my mind this week. Because it seems by this point in our story, Jesus's own celebrity seems to have hit a similar point because we see his posse of friends from back home, the disciples, very much acting like an entourage as well, to the point that these Greeks who have traveled a long way to try to see Jesus, apparently they need an in to gain access, in which case it seems to be Philip here.

Apparently the word has gotten out. His miraculous healings, His confrontations with the Pharisees, His rebukes of the priests for their indifference to the poor, the driving out of the money changers in the temple, which I can only imagine made headlines in those days. So as a result, John tells us that the crowds are following Him everywhere. And now even Gentiles from other regions are traveling to catch a glimpse of Him.

But notice we aren't really told why these Greeks have come looking for Him. Have they come out of curiosity? Are they seeking celebrity or spectacle? Are they hoping to meet this supposed Messiah, the foretold usher of a new generation, a new era of peace and justice? Might they be skeptics wanting to challenge these incredible stories that they keep hearing? Or have they just come to hear more of the gospel, the good news that's reached even their corner of the world, of a God who comes to welcome all, who comes to forgive all, who loves all. No, we aren't told why they've come, which I have to admit for a preacher is like such a beautiful, wide open door, too good to pass up because we're always looking for ways to read ourselves into the story.

So let's go through that door, shall we? Because just as these Greeks have come hoping to meet Jesus, have we not all come here today hoping for the same thing? Why did you travel the distance you did? Why did you fight whatever traffic you had to, why did you jump through whatever hurdles you had to get here? Trust me, I get it. My house looks like a bomb went off on Sundays after trying to get us all out the door. There's half eaten cereal bowls, curlers on the counter, a lingering haze of hairspray in the air.

So what brought you here today? Did you come seeking an autograph? Here to see what all the commotion is about? Or have you come looking for the one who knows you by name, who knows every hair on your head, who knew your face before it was stitched together in your mother's womb, and loves you like a mother? Loves you for who you are, as you are. Have you come looking for the Jesus who comforts? The one who can lead us besides still waters when the storm has become too much?

Have you come seeking forgiveness? Are the things that you've done or left undone, are they weighing on you this morning? Have you come looking for a community to see Jesus in the face of your fellow parishioners, the ones who've been praying for you because they know about your mother's illness? They know about that job you missed out on. They know about those test results you just received.

Did you come looking for the Jesus who inspires us, who renews our spirit, who energizes us, who fills us with such courage and confidence that there are some days where we feel like we can walk out those doors and change the world? Or have you come here this morning exhausted from bearing the weight of that world? Have you come this morning looking for help with whatever cross you've been given to bear?

We come to see Jesus for all of these reasons and countless others. And while we're not told what has inspired these Greeks, it seems their arrival is a tipping point because up to now in the gospel of John, Jesus has been saying over and over it is not yet my time. My hour is not here. But now it appears the message has spread. The good news is getting out. And so now it's just a matter of time before the powers that be conspire to try to put a stop to it. And so now He says the hour has come and He offers this, what you just heard, His final public teaching in this gospel.

Very truly, I tell you, unless of grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, if its focus remains only on itself, on its wellbeing, on its self-protection. If it remains cocooned in a hard protective shell, shut out from the world, then it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, if it allows itself to be broken open, if it allows what is inside all of us to be seen, to be nurtured, to be fed, then it can sprout and it can grow into something new, something that bears so much fruit that we can feed the world with it.

In other words, He says, those who love their life, those who hold it tightly, who try to control it, try to manage it at every turn. Those who chase every idol that the world throws our way, those who try to hoard it and build bigger and bigger barns to store it up, to protect it, to save it, caring only for themselves. They are the ones who will lose their life. Oh, they may look like they have it all, but endlessly pursuing the good life, Jesus is warning us, is to miss out on what it means to truly live.

But those who are willing to lose their life, those who hold it lightly, those who are ready to loosen their grasp and to let the spirit of love and mercy and generosity open up their lives and lead them to places, lead them to people they never thought they would meet, never thought they would know to love and serve those. They are the ones who will keep it. And they may live very simply. They may not have the marks of success. Their credit may not

be so good, their fashion's outdated. They may live on the wrong side of town, but they will be the ones who know true abundance, Jesus says, because they were willing to lose their life in the wellbeing of others.

Yes, Jesus is foretelling His own death and resurrection here, but He's also offering the rest of us, regardless of why we've come looking, the most direct path to finding Him. If we want to experience the healing, the forgiveness, the compassion, the companionship, the strength, the peace, whatever it is. Whatever the longing in our heart that brought us here, if we want to see Jesus like these Greeks, we don't need to push through the crowds. We don't need an in to get past the entourage. We just need to let go. To let go of the things that hold us back. We need to be willing to die to the things within us that stand in our way.

This has been probably the big question that we have been wrestling with in our Linton series on Thursday nights where we've been gathering some hundred or so of us to imagine what life more centered on Jesus might look like. But it seems we spend just as much time talking about the things that hold us back.

One that seems to keep coming up: have our lives become too complicated? Is our life stacked with events and obligations and to-dos? Have we become so afraid of missing out that we have already missed out on the countless ways that Jesus comes to us every day? In the face of a coworker, a customer, a gas station attendant, our own spouse. Have we become so attached to our devices, so addicted to the dopamine hit that they deliver, that we can barely keep eye contact with the Jesus who is right across from us? As our tendency towards tribalism, has it made us so self-assured, so self-righteous, that we can no longer recognize Him when He comes to us disguised as somebody who thinks differently, who looks different, who speaks differently, who believes differently, who votes differently?

The other night, somebody brought up how addicted we can get to our routines. Have we become so rigid and inflexible that we miss out on the Jesus that you can only find in the unexpected, in the unplanned, in the uncomfortable? And pretty much every week somebody brings up some version of pride. Are we so concerned about what people think about us, so worried about making it into the "in" crowd that we can't humble ourselves long enough to meet Jesus in the lowly and the least and the left out?

Again, the list is endless, but what is it for you? What must you die to, for the potential within you to sprout and bear fruit? And if that sounds really hard, if you think that it's, you know, too much to take on at this stage in your life, think again. Because if you have ever known love, if you've ever been in love, then you've done this before. You know how to do it.

One of my go-to theologians, Frederick Beatner said it this way. He goes, think back to the experience of love. When you love somebody, it's no longer you at the center of the universe. It is the one you love. And so you forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give yourself away so much that by all the rules of logic and arithmetic, there should be less of you. But by some glorious paradox of life, there is not less. There is more. More life, more love, more you. And all that stuff that held us back before, all of our fears, our hang-ups,

our anxieties, the doubts, it all just, they seem to somehow fade away before the power of love because we begin to lose ourselves in the life of another. And it should be no surprise that we will find Jesus there too.

As we begin to bring this season of Lent to a close, what is that for you? What do you need to let go of? I invite you to pray on that. Let God show you what it is. Maybe when you come up to the altar today, when you put your hands out to receive, maybe you can also imagine that you are placing whatever that thing is on the altar, whatever that thing that's been in your way, whatever that thing is that you need to leave behind, that you need to die to in order to find the Jesus that you came here to see, put it on the altar. Give it to God.

Jesus stretches His arms wide, not just to embrace us all with His love. He stretches them in order to take it all on for us. All of our suffering, all of our anger, our resentments, our fears, our insecurities, all of it. He wants to take it all from you. He wants you to be free of it. So you can be free. Free to love, free to live.

Amen.