

March 21, 2021  
John 12:20-33

Lent 5  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “The Hour Has Come”

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Everyone looked forward to Grandma Parker’s annual Easter feast. It was a meal unlike anything the family experienced on any other day of the year; not only did she cook both a fabulous Easter ham and turkey, but all her side dishes had a special touch that everyone at that table talked about all year. The mashed potatoes were the perfect consistency with just the right amounts of butter and garlic; the stuffing was a wonderful combination of sweet and savoury flavours; the biscuits were so light that no one would be surprised if they started floating in the air; and the pumpkin pie and whipped cream were the perfect ending to the meal. Sharing Grandma Parker’s feast on this most joyous day of the year was truly an occasion for which everyone in the family always gave thanks.

But Grandma Parker had some very specific rules that everyone needed to follow if they wanted to enjoy her sumptuous feast. No cell phones were allowed at the table, and controversial subjects such as politics were strictly taboo. Everyone needed to dress nicely for the meal – no tee shirts or ripped jeans were to be worn. But the one rule that had to be obeyed above all was that the meal was not served until everyone had arrived; even if one person was missing, the whole family waited, because Grandma Parker believed that “it isn’t a family meal unless it includes *all* of the family!”

That sense of beginning once everyone is present can be seen in today’s Gospel lesson, in which the arrival of the Greeks marks the beginning of a new section in John’s Gospel. These “Greeks” (*hellenos*) are to be distinguished from the Greek-speaking Jews mentioned in Acts (“*Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.*” – Acts 6:1). Because they have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, they may have been Gentile proselytes, non-Jews who observed some of the feasts and traditions of the Jewish faith. They are present in this story as non-Jews, representatives of the Gentile world. Their presence recalls the question from “the Jews” who wondered if Jesus’ upcoming departure might mean: “*Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and*

*teach the Greeks?*” (7:35). Their request to see Jesus underscores the Pharisees’ unconscious prophecy in 12:19 that *“the whole world has gone after him!”*

The Greeks who have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem approach Philip, *“who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’”* (12:21). Their request to “see” Jesus was a conventional way to request a meeting (*“Your mother and your brother are standing outside, wanting to see you.”* – Luke 8:20); it can also be read as their desire to become disciples. Because Andrew and Philip were the first to receive the invitation to discipleship directly from Jesus (*“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’”* (1:43), their presence establishes a connection between the call of the first Jewish disciples and the arrival of the first Gentile disciples in the presence of these Greek who *“wish to see Jesus.”*

When Andrew and Philip inform Jesus about the presence of the Greeks and their request to see him, Jesus responds that *“the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* (12:23). The arrival of the Greeks prefigures the church’s future mission to the Gentiles and the including of the Gentiles in God’s promises; it points to the fulfillment of the promises of universal salvation, the good news that all people may know *“that this is truly the Saviour of the world”* (4:42). Jesus identifies this moment as his “hour” because it is through Jesus’ glorification – his death and resurrection, his return to God – that God’s promises to God’s people are fulfilled. It is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah in which all people are gathered in the presence of the Lord:

- *“And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”* – Isaiah 56:6-7.

As Grandma Parker’s Easter feast could not begin until everyone was present, the presence of the Gentiles means that Jesus’ “hour” in which he is the Saviour of all peoples can now begin, a glorification that will be achieved through his death and resurrection through which *“all who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life”* (3:16).

- “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to the fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” – 10:14-16.

Jesus continues the proclamation of his “hour” with a series of teaching, the first of which includes an agricultural parable: *“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”* (12:24). In John, “fruit” is Jesus’ metaphor for the community of faith (*“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.”* – 15:4-5). Jesus uses the seed parable to show that the salvific power of his death resides in the community that is gathered from all people as a result of it, *“to gather into one the dispersed children of God”* (11:52).

Jesus continues his teaching to those who are gathered in his presence – both Jews and Gentiles – with the statement that *“those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life”* (12:25). To love one’s life is the opposite of Jesus’ own action; it takes place outside of the community shaped by Jesus’ gift of his life and leads to the loss of that life. To “hate one’s life” does not mean that one should engage in self-loathing; it speaks of a decision in which a person declares their allegiance to Jesus and in so doing receives his gift of eternal life. It is the love of which Jesus speaks when he states that *“no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”* (15:13), in the assurance that *“this is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”* (6:40).

The disciples are called to love as Jesus loves and to serve as he serves; therefore, *“whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour”* (12:26). Those who follow Jesus through his death will share in his glorification:

- “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” – 14:2-4.

Jesus' next words are reminiscent of his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in the moments before his arrest and crucifixion: *"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."* (12:27-28a). As Jesus prayed *"Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want"* (Mark 14:36), Jesus acknowledges that his upcoming passion and death are not a tragic accident that will afflict him but the fulfillment of God's Will for the salvation of all people. *"Jesus lays down his life of his own free will; he embraces his hour as an expression of his love for God and the moment of God's glorification"* (Gail O'Day). His words echo the psalmist who asks *"why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God"* (Psalm 42:11).

As the voice from heaven has confirmed Jesus' identity in other Gospels (*"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"* – Mark 9:8), so does the voice from heaven confirm Jesus' prayer when it announces that *"I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again"* (12:28b). The crowd recognizes this voice as a revelation of the divine, but they do not grasp that they have witnessed the unmediated presence of God in God's relationship to Jesus. Jesus needs to explain to them that *"this voice has come for your sake, not for mine"* (12:30), pointing to his death as the decisive moment of salvation for God's people. It will be the time of judgment of "this world" and the "ruler of this world," the embodiment of opposition to God: *"Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out"* (12:31). Jesus' hour – his death and resurrection – marks the defeat of the power of evil in the world by the one who *"has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death"* (*Small Catechism*). Jesus' words seek to comfort those who will follow him *"so that you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"* (16:33).

Jesus' final word to this assembly that represents all humanity is that *"I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself"* (16:32). There is a double meaning to "lifted up" (*hypsōō*). To be lifted up "from the earth" can be read as a description of the physical act of crucifixion, but it can also be read as a description of Jesus' exaltation in his return to God. The positive effect of Jesus' hour is described in sweeping terms ("draw all people") and highlights the universal offer of salvation available in Jesus.

We are never told if the Greeks' request to "see" Jesus is granted; but we do know that Jesus sees them, because their presence marks the moment when his "hour" can begin, when the fulfillment of God's Will in his death and resurrection might commence. As the birth of Jesus was announced as "*good news of great joy for all the people*" (2:10), so is the gift of salvation and new life good news for all people:

- "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" – Romans 10:12-13.

Paul's reference to Joel 2:32 shows that it has been God's Will from the beginning to reconcile all people unto himself, that God's purpose in Christ would not be complete until all people came to the full knowledge of God's love in Christ Jesus and all people knew that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Saviour.

- "That is why the chosen people now include gentiles as well as Israelites. There is finally do distinction between them. The same God is Lord of all races. The same God lavishes the riches of his mercy on all peoples alike. The same God proves his trustworthiness by delivering from their bondage to sin and rebellion all who call upon him in the trust that he is trustworthy and he will maintain them in his love." – Paul Achtemeier.

Grandma Parker's Easter feast could not be served until everyone was present because it was a meal that was meant for all – not merely some – of those for whom it was lovingly prepared. Jesus cannot announce that his hour has come until the Gentiles arrive because he is Lord of all – not merely some – of God's people. The mission of Christ's Church is likewise a mission that is meant to welcome all people into Christ's presence and into the fellowship of all who believe that this precious gift is truly for them. It is not a gift that is to be withheld from others, or kept to ourselves, or placed out of the reach of some. Our work as God's people is fulfilled only when we make certain that all people may come into our Lord's presence, when all people know that Jesus Christ is their Lord, when all people know that there is a place for them at the Lord's table and room for them in the presence of the Lord, in that eternal home to which our Saviour will "*draw all people to myself.*"

- "In and through Christ, people of different ages and lifestyles, from different races and classes, with different languages and educations, can join together and witness to God's compassionate presence in our world ... When we form a Christian community, we come together not because of similar experiences,

knowledge, problems, color, or sex, but because we have been called together by the same Lord. Only God enables us to cross the many bridges that separate us; only God allows us to recognize each other as members of the same human family; and only God frees us to pay careful attention to each other. This is why those who are gathered together in community are witnesses to the compassionate Lord. By the way they are able to carry each other's burdens and share each other's joys, they testify to God's presence in our world." – Henri Nouwen.

Even those who had waited impatiently for the latecomers to arrive knew that Grandma Parker's Easter feast could not have been served until everyone was present at the table, because it was a meal meant for *all*. The Church of Jesus Christ cannot be the church if only some are invited and included; it is a Church that truly embodies the presence of Christ only when all for whom Christ died are present and welcome. Our Lord is Lord of all, and our Lord's Church is Church only when all are welcome in this place where Christ welcomes "*everyone who believes in him [so that] they may not perish but have eternal life.*"

Amen.