

March 17, 2024
John 12:20-33

Lent 5
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Open Access”

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

I worked many different kinds of jobs during my student years, but the most memorable was working security at Lockheed Electronics. The job was ideally suited to my needs at the time: the plant was close to my parents' home, it offered lots of overtime in an air-conditioned setting, and I was provided with uniforms, so I did not even have to wear my own clothing. But I knew this would be far different from any work I had done previously when I was required to apply for security clearance before I could begin work. This was because Lockheed had several contracts with the United States Department of Defense, and therefore all employees had to receive various levels of security clearance to work in the plant. After waiting about a week (during which time all my references were contacted by government workers), I received my clearance and began work. It turned out to be a very interesting and challenging job, with a lot of policies and procedures to learn. One of the most important of these policies was making certain that every person who entered the plant had the proper identification and clearance; we had the authority to deny entrance to anyone who failed to comply (one day, I confronted a vice-president who tried to enter the factory without his identification, which he claimed to have left in his car; he was very upset when I told him he had to go back and get his badge, and the language he shared with me upon his return was less than cordial). Within the plant, there were areas that were even more secure, requiring special clearance; I would learn later that these areas were building guidance systems for missiles, and great care had to be taken lest this information fall into the hands of enemy forces. I found my time at Lockheed fascinating, exposing me to a world that was previously unknown to me and making me appreciate the importance of restricting access to places and information that could be used in very negative ways.

As I look back on my experience at Lockheed, I think of other places and circumstances when restricting access to certain places and information is important. There are times when we need to keep places off-limits for safety reasons; many towns require fences to be built around backyard pools so that people do not wander in and drown. There are times when access needs to be limited because of capacity limits, when putting too many people into a building could be a safety hazard. And sadly, there are times when people limit access to places and gatherings in order to

keep out others who are considered “undesirable”; one of my first lessons in discrimination was when I was told that a local country club was “restricted,” meaning it bared Jews and African Americans from membership. While restricting access may in some circumstances be necessary, in other situations it reflects human sinfulness that looks upon other people as less than worthy of being included in gatherings in which we restrict access to such people.

The world in which Jesus lived and taught was one that was defined by the means in which access was often restricted to keep certain persons apart, to deny them access to areas where only those deemed “worthy” were granted admission. There were clear boundaries that separated Jews and Gentiles as well as Jews and Samaritans; this explains why the Samaritan woman at the well is so surprised when she encounters a Jewish man asking her for a drink of water (*“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”* – John 4:9). But from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus makes it clear that boundaries that once separated and restricted access would have no place in the Kingdom of God that our Lord proclaims. Jesus’ work is universal in scope: he aims to gather all people, Jews and Gentiles, to the one God through himself, fulfilling the word of the Lord proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah:

- “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” – Isaiah 60:1-3.

This ministry of opening access and breaking down barriers continues in today’s Gospel lesson, where John reports that *“among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks”* (John 12:20). These “Greeks” (*hellenes*) are to be distinguished from Greek-speaking Jews who were a part of the Diaspora of Jews who lived throughout the Mediterranean (*“But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.”* – Acts 11:20). While they may have made the Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem as Gentile proselytes (converts to Judaism), John identifies them as non-Jews, representatives of the Gentile world. Their request to see Jesus confirms the Pharisees’ unconscious prophecy in 12:19: *“Look, the world has gone after him!”* These Greeks come to Philip, who is identified as a Jew *“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 brothers are standing outside, waiting to see you.”* – Luke 8:20); it can also be a

request to become disciples (“‘*Rabbi*’ (which translated means *Teacher*), ‘*Where are you staying?*’ He said to them, ‘*Come and see.*’” – John 1:39). Their presence establishes a connection between the call of the first Jewish disciples and the first Gentile disciples; the arrival of the Greeks prefigures the church’s future mission to the Gentiles and the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s promises. As such, it points to the fulfillment of the promises of universal salvation that the Samaritans proclaim after the witness of the woman at the well leads them to faith in Jesus Christ: “*They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.’*” (John 4:42).

Philip responds to the Greeks’ request to see Jesus by reporting it to his fellow disciples: “*Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.*” (12:22). When Jesus hears this news, he proclaims that “*the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*” (12:23). The presence of persons who would have previously been denied access to the presence of the Lord illustrates the beginning of the ingathering of all people to God, which Jesus’ death on the Cross makes possible. Jesus’ declaration that “*the hour has come*” points to his coming death, resurrection, and ascension – his “glorification,” through which God’s promises to all God’s people are fulfilled. His death and resurrection will make eternal life in communion with God available to all; “*Jesus’ hour is the decisive eschatological dividing line. The future to which the arrival of the Greeks points requires Jesus’ death.*” (Gail O’Day).

Using a phrase employed commonly in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus proclaims that “*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). This seed imagery recalls the parables of sowing found throughout the Synoptic Gospels (“*Listen! A Sower went out to sow.*” – Mark 4:3). In John’s Gospel, Jesus uses the seed imagery to interpret his own death: as a seed only produces fruit when it is buried in the ground, so will his crucifixion, death, and burial be the means through which he will produce the “fruit” that is Jesus’ metaphor for life in the community of faith (“*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*” – 15:8). Jesus uses this seed parable to show that the salvific power of his death resides in the community that is gathered because of it, for “*one comes to Jesus through his death*” (O’Day):

- “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know that Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” – 10:14-15.

- “He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.” – 11:51-52.

Jesus’ next statement has often caused confusion for many who believe that Jesus is advocating hatred of one’s life as the only path to discipleship: “*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, which is to offer his life for the sake of others. Loving one’s life above all else places a person outside of the community shaped by Jesus’ gift of his life for the sake of others and leads to the loss of that life. To hate one’s life “in this world,” on the other hand, is to declare one’s allegiance to Jesus, and so to receive the gift of eternal life:

- “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.
- “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.” – 15:18-19.

Since Jesus’ ultimate service is the gift of his life in love, the disciples are called to love as he loves and to serve as he serves: “*Whoever serve me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*” (12:26). The disciple is called not only to follow Jesus to his death, but also to share in his glorification; “*the way of the cross, with the self-sacrificial love and dying to self-centeredness it entails, is the only way for discipleship.*” (Francis Martin and William Wright).

In speaking of his impending death on the cross, Jesus shares the same emotions that are evident in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: “*now my soul is troubled*” (12:27a) evokes Jesus’ plea that “*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). By referring to Psalm 42:11, Jesus witnesses that he trusts in God even at the hour of his suffering and death:

- “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise my help and my God.”
- “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.” – 12:27b.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life of his own free will (“*No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.*” – 10:18). Jesus embraces his Hour as an expression of his love for God and the moment of God’s glorification. The appropriateness of Jesus’ prayer is confirmed by the voice from heaven that assures him that “*I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*” (12:28b). The past, present, and future of God’s self-revelation in Jesus are brought together in this statement; “*the Father himself audibly confirms Jesus’ prayer and by implication his whole mission and message.*” (James D. Ernest).

John reports that while Jesus hears the voice from heaven confirming his present and future glorification, “*the crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’*” (12:29). In the Old Testament, thunder was a common symbol for the voice of God, while throughout the Bible angels were understood as God’s messengers:

- “The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.” – Psalm 29:3-4.
- “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.” – Luke 1:26-27.

Jesus clears up any confusion among the crowd concerning the origin of what they have heard when he responds that “*this voice has come for your sake, not for mine.*” (12:30). As Jesus’ prayer at the raising of Lazarus was for the sake of others, so is this prayer an “*external attestation of the relationship between God and Jesus.*” (O’Day):

- “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me” – 11:41-42.

Jesus again refers to the “world” (*kosmos*) as those who God loves even though they are hostile to God in return in announcing that “*now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out*” (12:31). Having previously proclaimed that “*this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil*” (3:19), Jesus speaks of the fate of “*the ruler of this world,*” a phrase used elsewhere in the New

Testament to refer to the devil, the embodiment of opposition to God (*“In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”* – 2 Corinthians 4:4). Jesus’ hour marks the defeat of the power of evil in the world:

- “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He 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. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

The positive effect of Jesus’ hour highlights the universal offer of salvation available in Jesus: *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”* (12:32). As at the hour of Jesus’ death *“the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom”* (Mark 15:38), so do all have the assurance that in his death and resurrection our Lord Jesus Christ has broken down all walls and barriers that had previously restricted access to God’s love and salvation. Peter proclaims this open access to the grace of God in Jesus Christ when he announces that *“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* (Acts 10:34-35). Paul’s message to the Ephesians is the good news that in his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ broke down all barriers that might limit one’s access to God and fellowship with all who are called to share in the community of faith established through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

- “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death the hostility through it.” – Ephesians 2:14-16.

The arrival of the Greeks marks the moment when Jesus knows that his hour has come, the hour when he accomplishes God’s Will that *“everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”* (3:16). No longer will access to God be restricted to any people for any reason; the only limits that will exist will be the manner in which people respond to this gift of salvation and eternal life through the

cross and resurrection of Christ (*“I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.”* – 12:46).

My work at Lockheed required me to limit access to only those who were authorized to work in a place where there was information that could be dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands. But my work as a pastor is the opposite: there are not limits to the love of God, nor should there be any barriers that would restrict anyone from having open access to God’s Word and gracious love which are God’s gifts to all people. There is truly a “wideness in God’s mercy” through the one whose hour means the removal of walls and barriers so that all may know that they have access to the one who we believe is Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, he who is **Lord of all**.

Amen.