



John: The Man of the Hour

TEXT
John 2:1-11;
12:12-24

February 2, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” I would like that too.

In Clyde Edgerton’s novel *Raney*, Raney, who grew up in a small north Georgia town, marries Charles Shepherd, who was from Atlanta. Even though they were born not much more than an hour from each other, this marriage is a culture clash. Charles’ mother met Raney at lunch. They went to the K&W Cafeteria, and it was there that Raney learned that Mrs. Shepherd was, of all things, a vegetarian. “I got meatloaf,” Raney said. “Momma got meatloaf because they have wonderful meatloaf at the K&W, Aunt Naomi got turkey, but Mrs. Shepherd, from Atlanta, got a vegetable plate.”

“I took a class on simple living, and I’ve stopped eating meat,” she said. “I thought it just fit me.”

Raney said, “Somehow, I thought people were born vegetarians. I never thought about somebody just changing over.”¹

It’s a delightful, if not simple novel about how we understand ourselves, mostly by not being someone else.

In the year 70, the Roman Empire put an end to a brief revolt in Jerusalem. The Romans, in a matter of months, destroyed Jerusalem and, more signifi-

cantly, destroyed the temple. The destruction of the temple left religious life in chaos. The temple had been the core of Jewish faith. Without the temple, Jews had to ask, “What does it mean to be Jewish?” There were different answers to that. The Pharisees led that conversation, but the Jewish followers of Jesus were also part of that conversation. I say “conversation,” but it was heated.

The followers of Jesus lost that argument, and by the time John writes his gospel, close to the year 100, John writes to a congregation no longer part of rabbinic Judaism. They were no longer welcomed in the synagogue. Families were divided. You can hear the pain in John’s gospel as he speaks of “The Jews.” It sounds offensive to our modern ears, but it wasn’t anti-Semitic. They were all Jews. This was a family fight.

Everyone understood themselves, their own identity — at least in part if not in whole — by who they were not. Pharisees were not Zealots. Sadducees were not the Priests. And John’s congregation were none of these.

It is into this historical moment that John tells the story of Jesus. And I imagine it was both an inspiring but also hard word for his readers.

In John’s first sentence, he writes, “In the beginning was the Word.” In these first six words, John borrows from the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophy, suggesting that this gospel is for the whole world. One of John’s favorite metaphors is “Jesus was the man of the hour.”

Jesus attended a wedding feast in Cana. They ran out of wine. This is like inviting the whole neighborhood for Thanksgiving dinner and forgetting to cook. It was a social blunder so significant that it wouldn’t surprise the host family that they were written up in scripture.

Jesus’ mother tells him to fix it and he does, but not before he makes it clear “my hour has not yet come.” What’s does that mean?

A little Bible study: When John refers to the hour of Jesus, he is speaking of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. This is his purpose. And what we learn at the wedding in Cana is that it’s not time yet. He is waiting for something, but what?

In time, Jesus rides into Jerusalem and the crowds are waving palm branches. If it were not for John, Palm Sunday would be known as Branch Sunday or Limb Sunday. John is the only one to tell us that the branches were

palms. This is significant. New Testament scholar Gail O'Day says that "from the Maccabean period, palm branches were symbols of national triumph and victory."² Waving a palm branch was like waving the stars and stripes.

A little history: The Maccabean revolt occurred 250 years before John wrote this gospel. It was a brief revolt that pushed the occupying Seleucid Empire out of Jerusalem, and the Jews were independent for a moment. When the Maccabees reclaimed control of Jerusalem, they purified the temple of Gentile contamination, and as they did, they carried palm branches. That's when palm branches became a symbol of national triumph. The purification of the temple is what Jews today celebrate with Hanukkah.

What we see in this Jewish moment reveals a universal reality, which is that often we humans tend to define ourselves as "we are not them." We will do that this afternoon, as we will all be "Chief's Kingdom," and "nothing will be finer than to beat a 49er." We celebrate our team. We are not them. That's OK when it's a game. But we don't stop there. It seems once we start understanding ourselves as "not them," it never stops.

Daniel Miller is a leader in the Texas Nationalist Movement, which claims to be a group of about 300,000. Their purpose is to encourage citizens of Texas to vote to secede from the United States of America. Once you are defined by nationalism, it's hard not to define it more and more narrowly. He sees himself not as an American, but as a Texan.³

Perhaps, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, they waved palm branches because they assumed he came in the spirit of the Maccabees — bringing independence. He would drive the occupying Roman powers out. Threatened by his popularity, the religious types grumbled, "The whole world has gone after him." Hardly, but there is some irony here. And the world wasn't going after Jesus, but John is pretty clear: Jesus was going after the world.

Over and over, John shares this conviction. Jesus came as a light for *all* people, because God so loved the *world*. He will draw *all* people to himself, because he is Savior of the *world*. It's clear, Jesus may not have the whole world in his hands, but he has the whole world in his heart.

So, it's striking in this moment, when every heart was feeling the hope of nationalism and palm branches were still on the ground, that John says, some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. *Greeks*. They aren't Jews. They are Gentiles. What are they doing in this story, particularly at this moment when nationalism is running so high? They came to Philip. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

When this sanctuary was first built, the pulpit was built into the wall. It wasn't a piece of chancel furniture, like this one, but was part of the room. So, when it was time to renovate, that pulpit had to be removed. But I saved the podium, this portion that sticks up and holds our papers; I have that in my study. On it, there's a brass plaque that reads, "We would see Jesus." It's not an uncommon thing in Christian pulpits to find

little brass plaques that say that — we wish to see Jesus. It is intended as a reminder to the preacher that the folks didn't come for the preacher's word, but for a word from God. I like that.

It's ironic, then, that the ones who first said "We wish to see Jesus" never got that chance — or at least it's not recorded. Philip and Andrew came to Jesus and said, "Ummm, there are some Greeks. We don't know how they got past security, but there are some Greeks who wish to see you."

Rather than inviting them in for a cup of coffee or a Caesar Salad, Jesus says, "My hour has come." After repeating time and again, "My hour has not yet come," it seems these Greeks are who Jesus has been waiting for.

What is that about? If I understand the text, the Jesus John knows is a savior not of a nation, or a race, or even a faith, but of the world. The world may not be going after him, but he is here for the world, and now the world has a face.

"Jesus, there are some Greeks, Gentiles here" ... and Jesus says, "I have been waiting for them. I have come to save the world" ... and now the world has a face.

And when Jesus is lifted up, he draws all people to himself; he is the light for all people. That's what the salvation of Jesus is about. Gail O'Day says salvation is reconciliation.⁴ It's not just reconciliation with God, but with one another. The ministry of Jesus is ultimately to create a human community where we know and practice that everyone belongs to God.

Will Willimon was once a professor at Duke Divinity School

and then later a bishop in the Methodist Church in Alabama. He was once asked, “What do you miss most about teaching in the Divinity School?”

He thought for a moment and then said, “The admissions office.”

“What?”

“The admissions office is there to make sure everyone who gets in is pretty much like me.” He said, “In the church, we have to live with whoever Jesus drags in the door.”

I’m sure John made his folks uncomfortable when he talked that way. They had found cohesion with one another by not being the Pharisees, by not being the Sadducees, by not being the Zealots, by not being the Samaritans, and certainly not being Gentiles.

But the problem is that once we understand ourselves by who we are not, it never stops. Now when that happens in football, that’s all fun, although some will confuse it with things that really matter. But you won’t. But when we have to have an enemy to know who we are, then we no longer define ourselves; we just aren’t them.

OK, so what does this ancient story mean for us now? I think it is a warning against defining ourselves over against the bad guys, and an invitation to see the full humanity in those who are not like us. Salvation is reconciliation. It is the restoring of relationship. Jesus is the Savior of the world.

At the beginning of the last century, the church assumed that by the end of the last century, through the missionary movement, the world would be Chris-

tianized. Everyone would follow Jesus. Or less honorably, what we assumed is everyone would be like us.

It is clear now that God has created a world in which many religions and none at all will be the reality, apparently as long as people walk the earth. So, the work of salvation is not to make your neighbor Christian, but to be Christian to your neighbor. That’s what it means to speak of Jesus as the Savior of the world.

I met Maria Blandon in a little Nicaraguan village called El Jicaro. It was the middle of the Contra War, just one chapter in a long narrative of conflict and poverty and violence in that beautiful country. She invited me into her home, a very modest hut. We sat in plastic chairs, and she served me the strongest coffee of my life. On the wall was a single photo; it was of her son, who had died harvesting coffee. The Contra forces planted landmines in the coffee fields to try to keep the farmers from harvesting coffee, thereby making the poor even poorer. It was a tactic of war. Her son stepped on a landmine and died.

I was nervous — not scared, but uncomfortable. My nation and her nation were at war. So, I asked, “Maria, why have you invited me to your home?”

She said, “They said you are from the church. That means Jesus made you my brother. How could I not invite my own brother to my home?” And there for a moment in 1983, sitting in a Nicaraguan hut, we were not American and Nicaraguan, we were not Anglo and Latina, we were not English-

and Spanish-speaking, but rather just two human beings having coffee. And in that moment, I saw Jesus, if you know what I mean.

There are two stories in our world today. One is I am who I am by not being them. I’m a Texan, not an American. I’m a Republican, not a Democrat, or a Democrat, not a Republican. I’m a Never Trumper or a Forever Trumper. I am white and not black. I am educated or wealthy or ... or ... or ... I’m not you. That story is everywhere.

But there is another story. There is a story that says, we are all human, and all loved by Jesus, and we have to deal with all those God drags in the door.

If Jesus is the Savior of the world, then we have to find the human in one another. We have to see in one another that which Jesus loves and even died for. Maybe when we see that in one another, we will see Jesus. And we will discover that he is all around us in everyone we meet.

¹Clyde Edgerton, *Raney* (1985), p. 4

²Gail O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, The Gospel of John* (1995), p. 707

³*The Atlantic*, Dec. 2019, “The Secessionist,” p. 19

⁴O’Day, p. 714

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.