

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, MARCH 18, 2018,  
AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

As I was searching the Internet for help introducing the subject of today's sermon, I came across a website that had 20 of the best church signs for use by congregations looking to beef up their outdoor message boards in hopes of bringing folks in. Here is what they had to say:

- 1) Under same management for over 2000 years.
- 2) Try Jesus. If you don't like Him, the devil will always take you back.
- 3) Never give the devil a ride. He will always want to drive.
- 4) Worry is interest paid on trouble before it is due.
- 5) Forbidden fruit creates many jams.
- 6) People are like tea bags -- you have to put them in hot water before you know how strong they are.
- 7) When down in the mouth, remember Jonah. He came out alright.
- 8) How will you spend eternity - - smoking or non-smoking?
- 9) Honk if you love Jesus - - text while driving if you wish to meet him.
- 10) God does not believe in atheists - - therefore atheists do not exist.
- 11) The fact that there is a highway to hell and only a stairway to heaven says a lot about anticipated numbers.
- 12) Choose the bread of life or you are toast!
- 13) Our church is like fudge - - sweet, with a few nuts.
- 14) We are still open between Christmas and Easter.
- 15) Wrinkled with burdens? Come to church for a faith lift.
- 16) Church is who we are, not where we go.
- 17) If your life stinks we have a pew for you.
- 18) A narrow mind is usually accompanied by a wide mouth.
- 19) If history repeats itself I am so getting a dinosaur.
- 20) Blah, blah, blah. Just come to church. <sup>i</sup>

These are modern day signs for modern day folks. In Jesus' day, signs were surprising works of wonder done by magician-like folks to stun and amaze an audience. Prior to the gospel lesson that was just read to us, the author, John, writes of one of those signs, and reminds us that it was perhaps Jesus' most amazing feat, and the one that scared the religious and political folks around him, that of raising his good friend, Lazarus, from the dead. It is this sign that brings the Greeks to him in this morning's lesson; that is to say, Jews from far away, from what we call the *diaspora*, those dispersed beyond Jerusalem and other holy cities sacred to the Jews. These worshippers, these would-be believers, tell Philip, "we would see Jesus." Philip goes to tell Andrew and together they go to tell Jesus. And then, for the next five verses, we hear sayings of Jesus, seemingly unconnected, that John has remembered and pieced together to tell a story about how Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure from them.

The first, “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” appears that it could be a retort to “we wish to see Jesus and we want to see him now.” Jesus could be saying, “Can’t you see that this is not the right time to make such a demand?” You don’t really know what you are asking!” It’s his “hour,” a term that has special significance for John; it refers to the moment or moments when Jesus will die. Perhaps he is saying to the Greeks, “look, I have things I have to do to get ready for a really important event in my life, so please do not dissuade me by your interference. If you don’t understand what I mean, all will be clear in time.” Jesus certainly seems to be indicating that he knows the hour of his own death, and that if the rumors about raising Lazarus was what brought the Greeks to town, that was just a foreshadowing of things to come.

Well, you’ll note that the Greeks never do get to see Jesus, as far as we can tell. They are used as a kind of prop to allow Jesus to make a statement about his death and resurrection to his close followers who still do not seem to understand who he is and what his mission is about, despite having spent the last three years with him (marked as Passovers in *John* to emphasize their religious significance and his godly presence among them). Now, given what he has done and the signs and wonders he has perpetrated, the stakes will become too high for those who follow him to misunderstand his intentions. He makes it clear - - he intends to go to Jerusalem to die.

So it is surprising that he continues to use metaphor and analogy to speak his truths. He tells the disciples, “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.” This has seemingly nothing to do with the verse before it about the Son of Man, or maybe there is a connection. (When one looks at them and tries to understand their context, this whole section appears to be just a collection of the sayings, not unlike those that make up *The Gospel of Thomas...*). But Jesus does seemingly want them to understand on whatever terms he can come up with just what is going to take place in the very near future, not only with his life, but in the lives of those who hear him speak as well. This reminds me of the words of the hymn in our hymnal called “Now the Green Blade Riseth” that spell it out more clearly. It goes:

**Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,  
Wheat that in the dark earth many years has lain;  
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.**

**In the grave they laid Him, Love Whom we had slain,  
Thinking that He’d never wake to life again,  
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.**

**Up He sprang at Easter, like the risen grain,  
He that for three days in the grave had lain;**

**Up from the dead my risen Lord is seen:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.**

**When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,  
By Your touch You call us back to life again;  
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.<sup>ii</sup>**

Had the disciples known that song, had Jesus taught it to them, they'd probably have known all that was necessary for their future with him and their place in the world once he departed from it.

Jesus then goes on to tell them yet a third thing about what is to happen in the short time they have left together. He feels obliged to let them know that "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." It seems rather a harsh saying to take on to one's mantle of following Christ, yet there it is. But what does it mean in this context? Some suggest that it is bible-speak for "worship the seed and despise the plant." Earth is a garden in which all wishes and hopes should be buried in the belief that they will seed in the afterlife. So all the good things in life are merely fodder for what goes into the hole.<sup>iii</sup> Some think it means that if you love something, you must be willing to let it go; if you hate something you cannot let it go and you are condemned to constantly think of it. Hate shackles things onto the heart.<sup>iv</sup> Others believe it means the flesh and blood person who loves the immorality of this world will lose their reward in the next life, and they who hate the immoral world will inherit a better world in the next life.<sup>v</sup> But I'm not sure this has anything much to do about immorality, as much as it has to do with immortality- - namely that we cannot give ourselves over to an eternal life if we are still attached to all the trappings of this mortal life, and one of the trappings is unbelief. Therefore, believing in what cannot yet be seen is crucial. Jesus calls those around him to not only carry this vision forth in this life, but he hints strongly that it will lead us to something even greater, and that believing now will make us happier and loving of life, and even more so, prepared for death, not as a function of the ceasing of life, but as opening a doorway to something immensely grander than we have ever experienced. Jesus' death on the cross is the doorway between the two worlds, carnal (the flesh) and eternal (the spiritual). Death is how the two get put together to create the new creation that will allow us to live in the beloved community of the afterlife.

Then in his final proclamation of this section, Jesus appears to veer off course again (if one looks at the text as a series of his sayings), while at the same time concluding his thought process (if one follows John's stated intention to show that Jesus is the son of God, the son of Man, the long awaited Savior of the World, the Word incarnate, the Co-Creator of the universe.) John quotes Jesus as stating "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am,

my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” So now we see what the reward is beyond the gift of eternal life, that God will honor those who serve Jesus. It’s a nice thought, but I don’t know that it will motivate any of us to be any different when we leave here this morning. Perhaps it works with nuns and monks and those devoted to religious orders, but will it play in Peoria, as theater critics are so fond of asking? Have we ever thought that we should do things as Jesus would do them knowing that the return, or our gift (so to speak), is that God will honor us? And what does that even mean? John gives us the answer later on in Chapter 17, and that is that those who follow and love Jesus, who are with him where he is, will be loved in the same way that God loves Jesus.<sup>vi</sup> Could we ask for a greater love that to be loved by God as God loved Jesus? Probably not, if we understand all that such love entails.

Phew. That was a quick look at just half of the gospel for this morning. The second half, which is more of a unit as a whole, amplifies the verses that came before it, and we have another anthropomorphic moment (God acting like a human being) where God speaks and says, yet again, that what Jesus has asked has been -- or will be -- done. This time it is an announcement that the purpose of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus is to glorify God. It gets a bit weird here. Jesus speaks in a kind of imitative Roman imperial language, as if to cast a final one-upmanship over and against the political authorities, with a pronouncement that all best hear and regard well. ***God will be glorified***, he strongly implies, and this is, if necessary, what it will take: a death on the cross, a resurrection after three days; the seeming death of God, the actual saving of the world, then, now, and for the time to come. All this is necessary, it seems, in order to get our attention, like the signs I quoted at the start of this sermon, so that we will know and understand that God is present in this world and desires a relationship with us and the natural order as well. The cross becomes the reminder of this relationship and what it took to establish it. There is no easy road by which to maintain it; it is often accomplished at great cost. Think of all those who have gone before us to make it real to us today.

And why?

Andrew Murray, in the book *Jesus Himself* says “A dead Christ I must do everything for; a living Christ does everything for me.” The author Rob Bell writes “The cross is God’s way of taking away all of our accusations, excuses, and arguments. The cross is God taking on flesh and blood and saying, ‘Me too.’” The theologian John Piper in *Don’t Waste Your Life* expounds “Life is wasted if we do not grasp the glory of the cross, cherish it for the treasure that it is, and cleave to it as the highest price of every pleasure and the deepest comfort in every pain. What was once foolishness to us—a crucified God—must become our wisdom and our power and our only boast in this world.”<sup>vii</sup>

One final thought about signs, I saw this one and it stopped me in my tracks. It said, “Live so fully that Westboro Baptist Church will picket your funeral.” Yes, that’s who I want to be and how I want to be remembered, as a man who stood up for God – yea, glorified God. And you – what is your boast in this world. How do you wish to be remembered? Signs, signs, everywhere there’s signs – pick one, make it yours, don’t look back. It will rock your world.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.funnyandjokes.com/funny-church-signs.html>, etc.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/n/g/ngbrises.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20141202153731AA4k1Uy>

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> Gbelke, Enyonam @<http://enyonamsdailydevotions.blogspot.com/2011/03/god-will-honour-you.html>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/22-quotes-about-the-cross/>