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Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33

"Crossing Paths"

I once served a congregation that had a beautiful colonial style sanctuary. The sanctuary had a divided chancel, not unlike this one, with a lectern on one side and a pulpit on the other. The chancel was flanked by a set of large Corinthian columns which all but hid the choir and the organ from the congregation. At the back of the chancel, up several more steps, was an enormous communion table - or should I say - an altar. Above the communion table was the highly decorated colonial-style reredos on which the beginning words of John's gospel were carved and embossed with gold leaf. The high pulpit, with its sounding board, projected out from the chancel like the prow of a ship. The preacher reached the pulpit by climbing a set of narrow steps. You couldn't sit in the first few rows beneath the pulpit without getting a neck ache. It was a magnificent sanctuary. It was what some ministers call "a preaching palace." It was just the kind of place to give a preacher inflated ideas about the value of hot air.

One Sunday morning, some months after I became the pastor of the church, I was on a path to the pulpit to preach what I thought was a well-crafted, timely sermon with pithy illustrations. As I climbed the stairs, a little brass plaque on the edge of the pulpit (which I had never noticed before) caught my eye. The plaque faced the preacher. On the plaque was written the simple request from John's gospel, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Suddenly, the sermon I had so carefully prepared seemed small, insignificant and inadequate compared to the simple but compelling hope of every person who seeks the Truth of God. You might say that, on the way to the pulpit, Jesus crossed my path and I felt utterly inadequate to make Jesus known.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." These words are spoken to the disciples by group of Greeks, or Gentiles, who have come to Jerusalem for Passover. They have heard about Jesus and they are making their way to him. They have come to seek the truth. On this journey, will they cross paths with the truth? Is Jesus the Son of God who will cast out evil and bring life to the world? This simple request marks a turning point in John's gospel. The biblical scholar, Raymond Brown, has noted that John's gospel can be divided into two parts - the book of signs and the book of glory. The 12th chapter ends the book of signs and the 13th chapter begins the book of glory. In the first part of the gospel, Jesus is manifest as God's son, the Word made flesh. Jesus has come to bring truth and life. He is the one who makes God known. He has performed a number of signs to point the people to the light of God. Yet, the people of Israel have not followed the light or believed in Jesus. Now, the Gentile world comes to him (*The Gospel According to John*, Raymond Brown).

The turning of the Gentiles to Jesus marks the moment in John's gospel for Jesus to be seen by the whole world as the Son of God. Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of

man to be glorified." The unexpected truth is that the Son of God will be glorified on the cross. In the trial of Jesus, as it is portrayed in John's gospel, the world is judged and evil is exposed for what it is. In his death on the cross, Jesus is glorified and evil is cast out. Jesus likens his death to the image of a grain of wheat falling to the earth and dying in order to produce a great harvest. It is necessary for him to die in order for life to be given to the world. Bishop Leslie Newbigin points out that everyone understands the cycle of nature in which seeds die in order to generate new life. The death of Jesus that produces new life is not like the inevitable and necessary regeneration of nature. The eternal life that flows from the death of Jesus "is no longer a necessity imposed by nature: it is a freely-willed response to the love of God. (*The Light Has Come*, p. 156.).

God's path through the world is the way of the cross. Jesus says that he will be "lifted up from the earth" and will draw all people to himself. God's glory is revealed in the suffering death of Jesus. If we wish to see Jesus, then we need to look at the cross. In the cross, God establishes a new covenant with us. This is the covenant about which the prophet Jeremiah spoke. In this new covenant, just as in the old covenant, God promises to be our God and to forgive our sin. Unlike the old covenant, which was written on tablets of stone, God makes this new covenant in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is an everlasting, unbreakable covenant because Jesus is God's covenant partner. Through the Holy Spirit, God makes this covenant in our hearts.

The glory of God is revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. The truth that God is made known in the cross of Christ is a stumbling block to faith for many people. Sometimes, we want God to conform to our ways of thinking about power, life and success. God looks at the times of our lives from the perspective of eternity. The value of a life is measured neither by the length of years, nor in human terms of success. The God whose powerful Word created the universe is free to take the form of a servant and the path of self-giving love. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of the foolishness of the cross. He writes, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles; but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God (I Corinthians 1:23, 24)."

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Will those who seek Jesus cross paths with him in the church today? Jesus is most visible when the church gives itself sacrificially to a hurting and needy world. We won't see Jesus if we are all wrapped up in ourselves. Those who participated in our two recent mission trips to the Gulf States testify about how they experienced the presence of Christ as they worked side by side with Christians from other parts of the country and with those whose homes and lives were devastated by Hurricane Katrina. It almost seems that the more difficult the work, the more powerfully the Lord's glorious presence is known. When we are vitally connected to others through service, we cross paths with Jesus. You have heard me say that my goal is for each one of us to be engaged in some form of ministry with people beyond our usual circle of family and friends. We see Jesus in these relationships of self-giving love. We are a people with many talents and resources. I envision our becoming a congregation that gives 50% of our financial resources, time and talent beyond ourselves in service to Christ in the community and world. The more we join with those who are suffering by giving our time and resources, the more we will see Jesus crossing our paths.

When we, as a church, practice the kind of hospitality that Jesus extended to everyone he met, he becomes present among us. Christ is seen in humble acts of kindness and care. As followers of Jesus, we need to insure that each child, youth and adult who comes among us is treated as a person of infinite worth and value. When we welcome people among us, whom we do not know, by giving them our attention and respect, we open the door to seeing and experiencing Jesus' presence.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." We may never hear those words spoken to us quite so directly. Yet, our calling as followers of Jesus is to make him known. God's glory is seen in the lives of those who take up the cross and follow him. There is so much that gets in the way of others being able to see Jesus through us: a father's impatience, a friend's betrayal, a preacher's ego, a selfish heart, an unforgiving spirit, an abusive spouse, an uncaring teacher. It is not that we have to be perfect, but we are called to be open to the Spirit of God. When we allow Jesus to use our weaknesses as well as our strengths for his glory, then we become transparent and Jesus shines through us. The way we let our faith illuminate our struggles, our disappointments and our challenges may be the very path to helping another person see and experience Jesus.

One Sunday I was teaching a class on the subject of forgiveness to a group of young adults in my former congregation. One of the members of the class mustered up the courage to share with the others a traumatic experience he had in college. He had a very close friend who turned on him and physically and emotionally brutalized him. It took great courage for him to share his story. As he told the painful details of his experience, the other members of the class listened quietly. In the balance between his courage and their compassion, you could feel the presence of God's Spirit in the room. At the end of his account, the young man said that his faith in Jesus had given him the inner strength and peace to forgive the person who had wounded him. I could see Jesus making a path right through his journey of suffering and grace.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Where in your life does the love of God meet the suffering of the others? This is the very place where Jesus crosses your path and where Jesus is making his presence known through you.