

John 12:20-33 “Seed Must Die” ¹

Before the lesson – Bring a seed for each class member. Have clear tape so the seed may be taped to the handout to be used in the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

“Glory days” refers to the best of times in a person or institution’s life. What was a glory day in your life? (and hopefully there are more ahead!)

When was the last time you planted a seed? What seed did you plant?

Information

In his third year of ministry, Jesus was at his apex. These were the “glory days” for him. Thousands and thousands of people came to hear him preach. Hundreds of stories about healings and other miracles made him a legend in his own time. People probably knew the names of his 12 disciples like a baseball fan knowing the names of a favorite team’s players. From all appearances, nothing could go wrong now – and many were wondering how far it would go. Could Jesus even be the Messiah, the King of the Jews, who would overthrow Roman oppression? Why not? What can he not do?

- Have a class member read John 12:20-22.

“Following the despairing observation of the Pharisees that ‘the world has gone after him’ (v. 19), the introduction of the ‘Greeks’ (v. 20) anticipates the spread of Jesus’ following to all the world.”²

Greeks were not Jews. Why do you think they are in Jerusalem? (maybe they followed the Jewish faith, although not officially Jews; maybe they were passing through as merchants and heard about Jesus, etc.)

“The way of life and worship of the Jews, centered in the magnificent temple, was deeply attractive to some beyond Judaism, and no-Jewish ‘God-fearers’ were welcome to worship in the Court of the Gentiles in the temple.”³

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² Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 268.

³ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 239.

“The final event in John’s story of Jesus’ activity before his arrest is his reaction to a request by Hellenistic Israelites to see Jesus. This group follows Judean custom by coming up to Jerusalem for the Passover (the Greek verb here, *anabaino*, ‘to go up,’ had become a term for pilgrimage; the grammatical form implies habitual behavior).”⁴

Philip is a Greek name, so maybe the Greeks thought they could find a way to see Jesus through someone who might appreciate their culture. Philip tells Andrew. Then, the two disciples approach Jesus. What do you think the disciples were feeling about these foreigners wanting to see Jesus?

“One of the severe handicaps under which the church operates is the cover-up of the glory [of God] with respectable substitutes such as acceptance and honor, success and ‘relevance.’ Over and over again, we miss it. The Greeks missed it. Tourists at the holy sites, cameras at the ready, guidebooks in hand, tried to hire Philip as a tour guide to Jesus.”⁵

It is easy to imagine that at the height of his popularity, there could be a carnival-like, celebrity-like, tourist-like atmosphere. How is the church still tempted by “respectable substitutes such as acceptance and honor, success and ‘relevance.’”?

- Have a class member read John 12:23-26.

What do you imagine Philip and Andrew felt about Jesus’ response?

It would be easy for Jesus to “love his life” at this stage of his life. But, he had a bigger vision for himself and for the world. For the vision to be accomplished there was going to need to be a death.

“Following his death, Jesus will indeed ‘draw all people’ to himself. Since this worldwide mission happens only after Jesus’ death, in this Gospel the approach of ‘some Greeks’ indicates that the hour of his death and of the consequent extension of his work has now come.”⁶

“Crucifixion was considered dishonorable and shameful, but in John’s Gospel the cross brings honor or glory - both of which may translate the Greek term *doxa* - to Jesus and to God because the cross expresses God’s love for the world and brings to completion the life-giving work of the Father through the Son.”⁷

⁴ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 211.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 103.

⁶ Thompson, 268.

⁷ Thompson, 268.

Jesus says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” The disciples may have been pretty excited if he had stopped there. But he goes on to talk about dying.

Let’s look at the word “glory” from some Old Testament images.

- Have class members read Exodus 24:15-17; Exodus 34:29-35; 1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11

The word for “glory” here is *shekinah* [pronounced shuh-KIE-nuh]. “*Shekinah* became the word that marked this visible, light-spilling presence of God among us. *Shekinah* became a virtual synonym for God. When John immediately follows, ‘And the word became flesh and dwelt among us’ with ‘and we beheld his glory...’, many readers of his gospel, noticing the frequent references to glory (thirty-four times) in relation to Jesus, may well have heard echoes of *Shekinah*.”⁸

Once again, this may have given Jesus’ followers high expectations. “Time for the Son of Man to be glorified” sounds like a baptism of light and power.

But Jesus redefines “glory.” How does he redefine glory? (Glory has to do with death and sacrifice and service. Honor comes not from being served but from serving. A glorious productive life, like a seed, comes after death. Etc.)

- Have a class member read John 12:27-33.

Jesus confesses that his soul is troubled. What does this tell us about Jesus? Did Jesus have a choice?

It seems that Jesus was tempted to pray one way, but chose to pray another way.

“The prayer that Jesus did not pray is as important as the prayer he did pray. That Jesus, who ‘in every respect has been tempted as we are’ (Heb. 4:15) did *not* pray, ‘Father, save me from this hour,’ makes it possible for me also *not* to pray it, to reject the me-first prayer, to reject the self-serving prayer, to refuse to use prayer as a way to avoid God.”⁹

That is an intriguing phrase, “to use prayer as a way to avoid God.” What do you think that means?

“In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus prays for God to remove the cup of suffering and death from him; but in John Jesus refuses to pray for such deliverance... The Synoptics recount these events ‘front-to-back,’ so that one reads of the agony of Jesus as he wrestles with his destiny until he ultimately resolves to do God’s will... In John, the events are recounted ‘back-to-front,’ and

⁸ Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 100.

⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans. 2008), 210.

begin rather than end with Jesus' determination to do God's will...In his prayer, Jesus expresses the result of his life as its very purpose."¹⁰

“‘All’ (*ta panta*) emphasizes the scope of the divine work: God created all things through the Word (1:3); the true light enlightens all people (1:9); all things are given into Jesus' hands (3:35); and the Father shows the Son all that he is doing (5:20) and has given all judgment to him (5:22). In the work of creation and salvation, the work of the Father and the Son is one unified work. The God who creates the world is the God who saves the world.”¹¹

Again, we have talk of glory. And again, it is redefined. The glory of being lifted up will happen on a cross. Glory follows death. We are not to put our focus on death or the author of death. We look beyond evil, death, and the devil to see victory, life, and the risen Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

“The ruler of this world will be cast out.” - “There are no exorcisms in the Gospel of John; it is as if the only driving out that really matters is what happens ‘now,’ ‘in this hour.’ ...*The wisdom of John on this is to let Jesus be the fascinating one: so do not fear these powers, because they are not ultimate, they have already been defeated and need not dominate us, and they attain power only if they are feared, if their falsehoods are believed and trusted, and if they are obeyed.*...This imagery of victory over Satan, evil, and the negative dynamics of ‘the world’ has been central to one of the main ways of expressing the meaning of the death of Jesus, the Christus Victor approach.”¹²

Transformational exercise

- [Hand out seeds.]

Can you tell me what kind of seed this is? This is one seed, but how much fruit will come from this seed? If this seed stays in its packet, how much fruit will come from it? How is this seed like our spiritual life? (A seed is buried like a body is buried after a death. A seed experiences a resurrection but lives in a different way. To have spiritual growth, there must be a death, etc.)

“The basic principle of death before life works in ways both small and large. Suppose your house is painted white with black trim, but you want it to be gray with blue trim. The old color scheme has to die so that the new one might live. Suppose you want to lose weight or cut down on your cholesterol intake. Old habits and ways of eating will have to die before you can make that change and new, more healthful habits can be born. Suppose you want your life to make a difference for good and for God. Something of your old selfish nature will have to die before that happens, and the goodness of God is born fresh in and through your life. Suppose you don't want anything to change, but it does anyway. You lose your job. Your spouse walks out. Your body

¹⁰ Thompson, 269.

¹¹ Thompson, 271.

¹² Ford, 245. Author's italics.

gets sick. Your heart gets broken. Your spirit gets depressed. Every time change occurs, something dies — but that does not mean that death is the end. Change comes, but life comes with it. With a shift in perspective, we realize that those things that look like scars to us are really stretch marks. They're signs of growth. Every time change occurs, something dies – but that does not mean that death is the end.”¹³

How have you experienced this? Have you experienced it in your faith journey?

There is some good news. God wants the best for you. God wants you to be more than the shell of a seed. God wants your spirit to flourish and flower and produce fruit.

We have the choice of how we will pray. Will we pray to meet God or to avoid God? Will we retain old definitions of success and glory or will we humbly accept Jesus' redefinition?

- [Hand out index cards and tape.]

Tape your seed to this card. In the next moments of silence, I invite you to place yourself before the light of God, God's *Shekinah*, with a prayer, “What must die in me so you may live through me?” Give this time to listen to God's Spirit. After a minute of silence, I will close us in prayer.

[After a period of silence, close in a prayer something like this: *Creator of seed and flower and fruit, help us to die so we can live for you. Amen.*]

¹³ Tony Cartledge, “Dead Wheat: Digging Deeper: Dying to live,” *Nurturing Faith*, March 22, 2015.