

“We Are Universal in Appeal and God’s Suffering Servants!”

That video clip of the Scripture presents what Jesus said in a somewhat ominous or mysterious fashion. As the movie portrays, the disciples were most likely confused and worried, when they heard what Jesus said. If one were to come to this Scripture solely with the understanding or knowledge about Jesus, which is held among the general public today, then this Reading would be incomprehensible. However, if you and I study the whole of the Gospel of John, then this Text is much more understandable. That is because in it Jesus brings together several of the important parts of his message, ministry, and example. Put in the context of this whole gospel, the Scripture ties together and reveals **it is the intersection of several important elements of Jesus’ message and purpose.** Specifically, through the Reading, Jesus raises two crucial aspects of himself and of the Body of Christ – the Church – those called to be his followers – believers, who follow Jesus’ example of being a Suffering Servant of God.

Prior to the Reading, Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and experienced a great welcome from the crowd, which gathered because of the testimony they received from those who witnessed his raising Lazarus from the dead! Because it was at the beginning of the week leading into the Passover Festival, there were many religious pilgrims present, who came to Worship in the Temple. This Scripture begins by reporting some among the crowd of visitors were Greeks. Scholars disagree over whether those **“Greeks”** were gentiles from Greece or Jews, whose primary language was Greek.

John A.T. Robinson made a good argument by pointing out they came to Worship in the Temple, so they were most likely Jews, instead of merely being persons interested in becoming Jews. If that is the case, then they were either part of the Jews who happened to be living in the Greek speaking world or they were Jews, whose ancestors were part of the Greek Jewish Diaspora – refugees from one of the times when another empire conquered their nation.

Since these Greeks traveled to Jerusalem to Worship in the Temple, it is likely they were pilgrims from the Jewish Diaspora. The Reading reports in vs. 21-22, ***“They went to Philip (he was from Bethsaida in Galilee) and said, ‘Sir, we want to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew, and the two of them went and told Jesus.”*** These Greeks likely sought out the disciple Philip because his name was Greek.

After Jesus received this information from Philip and Andrew, he respond in vs. 23, ***“The hour has now come for the Son of Man to receive great glory.”*** It appears from what Jesus said that he recognized the interest in himself by ***“some Greeks”*** was an indication the time was quickly approaching when he would be glorified. The implications from this situation include the recognition Jesus and his ministry had universal appeal. Thus, a clear implication for us is we are called to invite all people, regardless of national, ethnic, or racial origin, to join in our communities of faith, fellowship, and service. Round Grove United Church of Christ takes that calling seriously and we endeavor to live out the words from our Mission Statement, ***“We seek to reach out to all persons ...”***

Much of the remainder of today’s Text reveals what Jesus meant when he talked about that being the time for himself ***“to receive great glory.”*** If you or I heard someone say it was time for him or her to receive great glory, most likely, we would understand him or her to be talking about being praised and celebrated. However, instead of focusing on the many self-serving and selfish possibilities of how Jesus could be honored, he pointed forward to his own self-giving sacrifice as God’s Suffering Servant!

Jesus began doing that by saying in vs. 24, ***“I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it***

produces many grains.” Jesus did not change his focus to explain the reproduction process of wheat. Instead, he used that saying as an allegory of how through his own death many more of his disciples would have a share in his ministry and purpose.

Then, speaking about how his followers and their lives are transformed by his being the Suffering Servant of God, Jesus put forth the call to follow his example, saying in vs. 25-26, ***“Those who love their own life will lose it; those who hate their own life in this world will keep it for life eternal.”*** Now, those words were not the type of teaching the original Disciples of Jesus wanted or expected from the Messiah they hoped Jesus would be. Instead, they wanted him to obtain glory, by being the great Warrior King Messiah, who would destroy the Roman oppressors and their empire. They certainly did not want him to die or for them to lose their lives!

Although Jesus did not in that moment specify he was about to die, the writer of the Gospel of John repeatedly reveals, Jesus knew there would be a moment when he would give up his life – when he would fulfill his purpose of being the Divine Parent’s Suffering Servant. For example, in a recent sermon we examined how Jesus said in John 10:17-18b, ***“The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life, in order that I may receive it back again. No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will.”***

There is no doubt Jesus understood he was about to die in the fulfillment of his purpose. In the verses immediately following this Reading, Jesus clearly spoke of his struggle with laying down his life. Yet, he went on to say in verse 28, ***“Father, bring glory to Your Name!”*** In the same verse the gospel author reports, ***“Then a Voice spoke from heaven, ‘I have brought glory to it, and I will do so again.’”*** That scene affirms Jesus’ purpose for coming into this world included being God’s Suffering Servant! Elsewhere in this gospel, it is also disclosed, Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for us – he is God’s Suffering Servant!

So, you and I and all, who follow and believe in Jesus are to also be God’s Suffering Servants, for he concluded today’s Reading, saying, ***“Whoever wants to serve me must follow me, so that my servant will be with me where I am. And my Father will honor anyone who serves me.”***

Summing up, in this Reading, Jesus put forth part of our nature as people, who belong to him, is to be God’s and his Suffering Servants. Christians are to manifest Jesus’ example of being God’s Suffering Servant through our sacrifice and suffering on behalf of God’s purposes in our daily lives. Even the Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke put forth brief glimpses of this same self-giving or humbling calling, such as, the quote from Matthew 23:12, which is found on our bulletin covers for today, ***“All who humble themselves will be exalted.”*** It goes along with following Jesus in **his “glory” – his dying for us.**

Continuing our summation, a second aspect of our nature as believers is we are persons, who support Jesus Christ’s universal appeal to all people from all nations, ethnic groups, and races by welcoming them into local congregations. One of the reasons Jesus was so rejected and hated by the Jewish authorities was because he welcomed all people – even the outcasts – the sinners according to the rigid legalists, and the gentiles or non-Jews. You and I and all Christians are to follow his example of radically and extravagantly welcoming everyone – without prejudice and with respect and self-giving love!

In conclusion, believers cannot continue to allow the world and its ways to keep us in bondage to selfishness, nationalism, or to racial or sexual prejudice, or to the worship of wealth and possessions. We, like Jesus, are to be **Universal in Appeal and God’s Suffering Servants!** Amen.