

March 22, 2015, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
John 12:20-33

### **Crowds & Connections**

Spring breaks, St. Patrick's Day parades—festivals such as these cause crowds, people coming together to celebrate. In the gospel today, people have come to Jerusalem for a festival, the festival of Passover, the Jewish celebration of being freed from slavery in Egypt. Jesus and his disciples have also come. Just as we are nearing the end of the Lenten season, in the gospel it's nearing the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, drawing near to his holy Passion, which will culminate in Jerusalem.

Some of those who make up the Jerusalem crowd, like Jesus and some of his disciples, have come from places near, from Nazareth or Capernaum, smaller towns to the north of the holy city. Others have come from much farther afield, far to the west of the Holy land, from Greece. As today's gospel story begins we hear about some of these people, who want to see Jesus. These Greeks could be Gentiles, their interest in Jesus a sign of the widening arc of his message. Or, perhaps more likely, these people are Jews who live in Greece; they are part of the Jewish diaspora, come to the city to celebrate. But though these Greeks are from far away, they must have heard something about Jesus, something that draws them to him. And so they approach one of Jesus' disciples, the one named Philip, and they say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

As I think of these travelers and their request, as I remember that they are there in the city from out of town, I think that what they say makes them sound a bit like tourists. They're both direct about what they're asking, and they're also asking for directions: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Tourists can do that, make assertions that are also an appeal. "Sir, we wish to see The Bean."

One day last week I traveled downtown to the new Maggie Daley Park. It's directly east of Millennium Park, Lake Shore Drive flanks it on the other side. It's a brand new park, with impressive playground areas and it was crowded with people. Some of them were surely Chicagoans, others were clearly less familiar with the city. I overheard one woman asking directions from a park worker. She was interested in seeing the Chicago River, which last week was green. As she spoke to the park worker she pointed in the direction of a body of water. The worker patiently and kindly said, "No ma'am, that's Lake's Michigan."

Now I suspect that lady approached a park worker, because he had on special garb, a vest with a name badge on it, simple things which identified him and his connection to the city, his tie—not a particularly strong tie. His badge didn't say "Tour Guide," or "I know that's the lake, downtown it's east" but still, something about him suggested a familiarity, an acquaintance with the city.

In the same way, in the gospel story today, the Greeks may have approached Philip because of a connection, a tie they had with him. Philip, the text notes, is from Bethsaida, which at that time was a town with a population of Greeks. The name Philip, in fact, is a Greek name. Perhaps these out of town Greeks came up to Philip because they heard someone calling his name, or perhaps they heard him talking, and he had a certain accent. There was some kind of identifying tie, not a particularly strong one, but still a reason they might speak with one another.

They go to Philip, and then Philip goes to Andrew, and then both Philip and Andrew go to see Jesus, and then Jesus makes this speech: "Very truly I tell you," Jesus says, and then summarizes what he's been preaching all the way to Jerusalem, for all of his ministry, his message and mission: how your life is saved by losing it, how following him means serving

others, and how he will overcome all the powers of this world by being lifted up.

Jesus says these things as an answer to the Greeks' request, "We want to see Jesus." Jesus says, "You want to see me? This is what you should look for: Look for a grain of wheat falling to the ground, dying, and bearing much fruit. Look for instances, for individuals, who let go of individualism, who let go of singularity and selfishness and become sources of blessing for people and places beyond them: neighborhoods, cities, nations and beyond. Look for people who set their mind on things above, who love a higher purpose more than convenience and comfort or even the certainty that everything will all work out."

Jesus says these things, but it's not exactly clear that the Greeks hear it, that they are even there to hear it. After their request, which occurs right at the beginning of the reading, they're not mentioned again, they might have disappeared from the scene. You never do hear whether they got to see Jesus, or went to Navy Pier.

So when we hear that Jesus speaking here, he could be speaking to them, but he is certainly speaking to us. We, who want to see him, this is how, this is what we will see: see his message taking root, see his ministry bearing fruit. That's what we will see, that's all we get to see. That's all we need to see. As Jesus says later in this gospel to yet another person who wants to see him, a person named Thomas, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who do not see, and yet believe." Jesus is speaking to us there as well.

As are the Greeks, in the story today, they speak to us, too. Not so much what they say, but what they do: they approach Philip, someone with whom they have at best a weak connection. I am thinking here of the insights of mathematical sociology and interpersonal ties—the study of the kinds of connections, or ties that people have, and what those ties do. There are three kinds of ties, strong ties, weak ties, and absent ties. Strong ties are what one has with a family member, a best friend, a business partner. Weak ties are what one has with someone one knows a little about, but not too much, acquaintances perhaps. Absent ties—no connection there at all, and not much they do, except cause pain, because they are absent. Strong ties, in contrast, well you know how significant they are, who they are: the people you could call up in the middle of the night, the people you go to for matters of life and death. We all need those key, strong ties.

Yet weak ties, despite their name, are extraordinarily important as well. Weak ties, in fact, uphold structures of society. You may be more polite, more helpful with people with whom you have weak ties. You may be more patient with a directionally-challenged stranger than you are with your spouse. Moreover, weak ties are responsible for the transmission of tremendous amounts of information. Weak ties increase communication, spread innovation, actually more than strong ties do. People with whom we are very close move in the same circles as we do, information they have overlaps with things we already know. But people we do not know all that well are more likely to share things that are new to us. Someone told me I should go to Maggie Daley Park, so I did. What a great park. Someone told someone at a neighborhood meeting about our Campaign to fix The Gym, and then that someone energized other someones with whom he was connected, and they made our biggest pledge yet.

Someone told some Greeks that they should look for Jesus. Someone told you about this church, its mission, its ministry. Someone told you about the message of Jesus, how it frees us for a life of forgiveness, and abundance. You can tell someone, too. Tell someone, and listen to someone, with whom you may only have a tie, even a weak tie. You don't need to be good with directions; you don't need to know all the east and west of Christian faith. Other connections, other disciples, can and will help. Talk to an acquaintance, and while you are at it grab an Andrew, and together go to our compass, Jesus, our north, south, east and west +. He's our strong tie, our strongest tie, and he will draw all thing to himself.