

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – March 18, 2018

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

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. How do you decide to do the right thing, especially when doing the right thing will come at some cost to you? Maybe even great cost? Have you faced that kind of decision in your life? If you have, how did it go for you? Did you do the right thing? Or would doing the right thing have been too costly? On one hand I think of the example of workers at the Chernobyl and Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear plants who faced radiation poisoning in order to prevent even greater disaster as reactors in those two plants melted down. At Chernobyl, three men went down underneath the reactor as it was melting down and waded through radioactive water to reach valves to empty a tank of water. If the reactor had melted through into that water it would have caused a steam explosion that would have destroyed the other three reactors and led to massive radiation poisoning across Europe. 25 years later at the Fukushima Daiichi plant some 60 employees risked their lives to stay at the plant after the earthquake and tsunami to shut down reactors that were not already compromised. On 9/11 Firefighters rushed into the twin towers and saved thousands of lives before the towers collapsed and killed them. And on one of the hijacked airplanes, passengers overpowered the hijackers and prevented it from being flown into the White House, but at the cost of their own lives as the plane crashed into a Pennsylvania field. We call people who do the right thing in circumstances like this “heroes.” And then there are examples on the other side. The 38 neighbors of Kitty Genovese in New York who might have prevented her from being killed if even one of them had called the police. But none of them did in the course of the 30 minute attack that took her life. Another counter-example is the movie Saving Private Ryan. If you’ve seen that movie, you know what I’m talking about. If you haven’t, I won’t give away any spoilers.

Most of us don’t face anything as dramatic as the examples I’ve given, but we are still challenged on a regular basis – in small ways and not-so-small ways – to do the right thing. Someone asks us for help, and we respond or we don’t. There’s an election this Tuesday here in Illinois. It’s one of the important ways we govern ourselves in this country. Some of us will vote, and some of us will not. In the last Illinois primary in 2016 only about half of the registered voters in Champaign County cast a ballot. In the general election it was better at close to 70%. And there are even more mundane opportunities for us to do the right thing, or not. The next time we’re in that slow moving line at the grocery store we can choose to be grumpy and entitled with the cashier, or we can be pleasant and patient. And the same goes in our daily interactions with our coworkers, our clients, our spouses, our parents, or our children. How do you decide to do the right thing?

In our gospel reading from John this morning, Jesus is faced with doing the right thing or “bailing.” This reading comes at a pivotal point in John, at the end of the first half of the gospel. This first part of John is sometimes called the “book of signs,” because between chapter 2 and chapter 11 Jesus performs 7 signs that point to who he is and what he is up to. The first sign is the wedding at Cana. You know the story. The wine runs out and Jesus’ mother Mary comes to tell him about it. Do you remember what he says to her in response? He says, “what does that have to do with you and me? My hour has not yet come.” Now here in chapter 12, after the 7<sup>th</sup> sign, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus says what? “The hour has come...” And what makes him decide that “the hour has come”? It’s the arrival of these Greeks in Jerusalem for the upcoming Passover festival. They were either Greek-speaking Jews or Gentiles (non-Jews) who

were interested in Judaism and the God of Israel. Either way, what they represent in John's telling of the Jesus story by coming and asking to "see Jesus" is that now the world is watching. The world wants to meet Jesus and to get to know him. *That's* what sets Jesus off. Because in order for the world to know who he is and what he is all about, he has to now do what he came to do. This is how Jesus decides to do the right thing: He remembers who he is. He's got to go now to his death. He has to go and be that seed that will "die" in order to "bear much fruit." Now of course he could ask God the Father to "save him from this hour." We don't get quite the same scene here in John that we get in the other three Gospels – the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus first prays for the Father to "take this cup away," but then he quickly says, "Not my will, but yours be done." Here in John it's different. Here it's a matter of identity for Jesus. He will not even ask to be spared from his fate because *this is what he came to do*. This is who he *is*. It is remembering who he is that leads him to his decision to "do the right thing."

Not that this was an easy thing for him to do, even in John's Gospel. "Now my soul is troubled," he says to his disciples. This is difficult for him. Surely he must have been tempted to lead a normal life, to get married and have a family, children and grandchildren, and to die in his old age. That was the Old Testament vision of the good life, after all. But there was a lot about even that "good life" that left much to be desired. It was life lived in a world of slavery and exploitation. I mentioned Abraham and Sarah and Sarah's slave Hagar a couple of weeks ago. It was also a life lived in a world of warfare and famine, a world of poverty and injustice. Jesus simply cannot withdraw from this world to serve his own personal dreams. He cannot leave the world as it is when it is in his power to save it from itself. Because of who he is, he must go to the cross.

So how do we decide to do the right thing, even when it costs us dearly? I'm going to suggest that we do it the same what Jesus does, by remembering who we are, and *whose* we are. We belong to Christ, baptized into his death and resurrection. Like Jesus we constantly face the temptation to live for ourselves, and to trust all the false promises that tell us that we "deserve" only the best, that our life is all about us, that we should spare no expense or effort on all those things and experiences that we dream about.

What Jesus promises us, on the other hand, is life. That is the whole point of Jesus coming into the world, and the reason John wrote his Gospel – so that we may come to trust in Jesus and have the life he promises and makes possible. That life is a new and better life. But to obtain that life we have to give up on the false promises that the world around us so often bombards us with. That's what Jesus means by "hating our lives" as they currently are, lives that depend upon the world as it is. If we love our lives and the world as it is, it's either because we're not paying close enough attention to the world around us, or it's because we just don't care about all the people who have gotten the short end of the stick in this life.

The good news is that God is at work to save the world that God loves, as we heard again in last week's famous gospel reading. And part of that work is driving out the ruler of this world. Things cannot continue as they are. And Jesus' death and resurrection are the beginning of the end of the *status quo*. They are also the beginning of our death to all the false promises of this world and our resurrection to new life that begins right now, even on this side of the grave. May God grant us grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to remember who we are and whose we are, to trust Jesus and his promises, and to let them guide our lives in the little and the big troubles of this world. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.