



Catalog No. 1376

John 12:20-26

Thirty-eighth Message

John Hanneman

January 21st, 2007

## LIVING AND DYING WITH PURPOSE

Today we will address one of the most important and difficult truths which the Lord taught his disciples. This truth concerns death, both Jesus' death and our own. Thinking about death makes people fearful. However, the truth which Jesus lived and gave to us is arguably the most liberating and life-giving truth in the Bible.

The context for this truth in John's gospel comes as a response to a very significant development that of the four gospel writers only John records, in chapter 12 of his account.

**Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus. (John 12:20-22 NASB)**

The context is Passover, the last week of our Lord's human life. Jesus had just entered into Jerusalem to the shouts and acclaim of the huge crowd flooding the city for the Passover celebration. The people proclaimed him as the Messianic King, but the Lord refused to accept the role they wanted him to take. He is exalted as king, but he has entered into Jerusalem for a completely different reason: He has come to die. Chapter 12 marks the beginning of the end, or more appropriately, the end of the beginning.

Amidst all the fanfare, some Greeks come to Philip asking to see Jesus. These Greek-speaking Gentiles came from part of the Greek-speaking world, possibly even as near as the Decapolis, northeast of the Sea of Galilee. They are not necessarily proselytes, but they are God-fearers. Many Gentiles came to Jerusalem during the feasts because they admired much of what they saw in Judaism. In the temple they would take their place in the court of the Gentiles. In contrast to the Pharisees, they represented the whole world. (The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is a case of Gentile interest in Judaism.)

These Greeks don't approach Jesus personally. Rather, they come to Philip, who like Andrew had a Greek name. If some of these Greeks had been from Decapolis they might have heard of or even recognized Philip, who came from the nearby city of Bethsaida. In chapter 1, Andrew, who was also from Bethsaida, had an encounter with Jesus, and the

next day he found Philip. Here the sequence is reversed. Philip and Andrew then come to Jesus.

We are not told why the Greeks want to "see" Jesus, but the word implies that they want to have an interview with him. Perhaps a day or two has passed since the triumphal entry, and Jesus has cleansed the temple by driving the moneychangers out of the court of the Gentiles.

The mention of Philip and Andrew and the word "see" connects us to the encounter which Andrew and Philip had with Jesus in chapter 1. Then, Andrew and another of John's disciples were following Jesus and Jesus asked them, "What do you seek?" Jesus himself responded with the words, "Come and you will see." Andrew found Philip, and Jesus told Philip to follow him. Philip found Nathanael and told him they had found the Messiah. Nathanael said something about good coming from Nazareth and Philip told him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael before Philip called him and told him he would see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Now the Greeks have come to see Jesus. They are searching. They want to see God. They want to know the truth.

**And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. (12:23)**

The first part of Jesus' response is startling. He says the hour has now come for him to be glorified. Up to this point in John's story there are several occasions when he says the hour or time is not yet, it is future (2:4; 4:21; 23; 5:25, 28; 7:6, 8; 7:30; 8:20). The "hour" that has come is not about Jesus beginning his ministry or building his kingdom. What happens to the Greeks is irrelevant. The "hour" is the appointed time of Jesus' death, resurrection and exaltation. The oft-used title of Son of Man refers to both Jesus' suffering and his coming in glory. Later, Jesus refers to his glorification as being "lifted up," an allusion to Isaiah 52:

**Behold, My servant will prosper,  
He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.  
Just as many were astonished at you, My people,  
So His appearance was marred more than any man  
And His form more than the sons of men.  
Thus He will sprinkle many nations,  
Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him;  
For what had not been told them they will see,**

**And what they had not heard they will understand. (Isa 52:13-15)**

Now that the Jews have rejected Jesus and the whole world has gathered, the hour for Jesus to do what he came to do is at hand. The hour is initiated by the whole world waiting to embrace the Jewish Messiah. This small incident is a major turning point, a watershed event in God's plan of redemption. Jew/Gentile distinctions now are past tense. Now begins the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Last week we talked about the triumphal entry and saw how that event fulfilled Zechariah 9:

**"Behold, your king is coming to you;  
He is just and endowed with salvation,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey" (Zech 9:9 NAS95S).**

Just prior to that verse there is another promise:

**And a mongrel race will dwell in Ashdod,  
And I will cut off the pride of the Philistines.  
And I will remove their blood from their mouth  
And their detestable things from between their teeth.  
Then they also will be a remnant for our God,  
And be like a clan in Judah,  
And Ekron like a Jebusite. (Zech 9:6-7)**

The nations, the Gentiles who have been enemies of Israel, now become God's people by believing in Jesus as the Son of God.

I have a couple of thoughts about this.

In our world today there are many people who want to see Jesus, God-fearers who are drawn to everything good about true Christian community. They know that life has to be more than just what they see. They long for significance, love and forgiveness, for healthy lives and a sense of permanence. Christians are the Philips and Andrews bringing them to Jesus and telling them about the hour when Jesus gave his life for them that they might have a relationship with God.

My wife is an example of this. She and I met in our early twenties, just after I had become a Christian. She grew up believing in God. She would talk about God and write notes to God about our relationship. One day I told her I was a Christian. When she said she was too, I said I didn't think that was true. I brought her to church and she began to hear the truth of Scriptures and learned about Jesus. It wasn't long before she not only embraced God the Father but also God the Son.

And second, God uses us in the lives of people we would not expect or anticipate or choose. Jesus "came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as

many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:11-12 NAS95S). Jesus came to the house of Israel, which was his family. He wept over Jerusalem, longing for God's people to embrace him and believe in him. Instead they rejected and killed him. However, there were people like the Greeks in John 12 who received him and became children of God.

We long to share Jesus with our family and closest friends. We want to have close relationships with them. We want to share spiritual life and hunger for them to know the Lord. But often the very people we care most deeply about are closed to the gospel. We often feel the greatest tension with the people we love the most, those we think about and talk about most, but God in his providence gives us Gentiles. While the hearts of our family and friends remain closed, God gives us people whose hearts are open. And while we hurt for those who reject us, we experience great joy when God uses us to minister to some unexpected or unanticipated individual. God gives us a spiritual family that is more family than our physical family. This was true for Jesus, for Paul, and for many of us.

This has been true in my own life. My becoming a Christian created tension with my parents and my two brothers, even though they went to church and believed in God. The problem was I wanted to talk about it and they didn't. On one occasion when I was trying to talk to my nephew about spiritual life on his college campus, my brother let me know in no uncertain terms that I was never to talk to his children about God. I still recall how deeply I agonized over that conversation. At yet, I have experienced abundant joy as God in his sovereignty has brought people my way to be used by him in their lives. He has given to me an incredible family, fathers and sons and brothers with whom I can share deeply.

This pattern for live and ministry began the day when Jesus' hour had come. But now we move on to more serious matters as Jesus continues to speak to his disciples:

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him." (12:24-26)**

Jesus shares a metaphor from the world of agriculture. It is a very important metaphor, since it is introduced by the words "Truly, truly." In other words, "Listen up. This is of utmost importance. You can take this to the bank." The metaphor speaks of how vegetation grows and bears fruit – a fact of nature that is visible and observable every day. You can't leave a seed sitting on top of the ground imagin-

ing there will be growth and resulting fruit. The seed will not produce anything and you will be sorely disappointed. However, if you bury the seed in the ground it has the capacity to sprout and produce the plant or fruit consistent with its nature. Jesus likens the burial of the seed to death.

Following Halloween a couple of years ago, we tossed our pumpkins in a compost pile in the backyard. Last spring, when I planted tomatoes, I used the compost for fertilizer. As the tomatoes grew I noticed that something else was growing too. I didn't know what it was until the fruit began to develop. At first I thought it was watermelon, because the fruit was green, but when it started turning orange I realized it was pumpkins. They spread everywhere, latching onto my tomato stakes and even into our lemon tree. The seeds from the discarded pumpkins had been given new life when they were buried in the ground. If I had left them sitting on the ground, they would have rotted and the seeds would have remained alone.

Jesus applies this metaphor to what will soon take place. He will be like the wheat seed that must die and be sown in the ground. His death will result in the germination of life for a great crop, yielding a plentiful harvest. If Jesus doesn't die, nothing will happen. His death is what produces the fruit of life.

Jesus also applies this metaphor to us: "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me." Following Jesus is both bad news and good news. The bad news is that we follow him into death. We have to lose our life. We die initially when our life is joined with Christ. We are united into his death and burial. We then die throughout our life as we take up our cross daily and follow him.

The good news is that if we die and give up our life, then we will have eternal life. Our life will produce a fruitful harvest. We will be with Jesus, and God the Father will honor us. We are united with Christ in his resurrection. "For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor 4:11 NAS95S). As Eugene Peterson says, "Resurrection takes place in the country of death."

What does it mean for us to die? Jesus says that instead of loving our life we must hate it. We have to stop controlling, grasping and hanging on to our life and our security. This is not an emotional hating, but rather a matter of preference and choice. It is like hating father and mother in order to follow Jesus. We choose the life of God over our life in this world. This does not mean that we despise or loathe or devalue ourselves. Many Christians interpret Jesus' words in this way, but that is not what he is saying. It means that Jesus is a higher priority. We don't allow our love for the world or the things of the world or even our parents to dictate our life.

When we love our life we place a high value on the things of the world and our place in it. When we die we place a higher value on eternal things than the things of the world. To love one's life is a fundamental denial of God's sovereignty, of God's rights, and an elevation of self to the summit of one's perception; it is an idolatrous focus on self. To love one's life is a choice to pander to self-interest. To die means to deny yourself and take up your cross daily, to replace self with following and serving Jesus. Self has to be displaced by another. The contrast here is between this world and the eternal and between life and death.

The way we die is very intentional and purposeful. Jesus was very intentional about giving up his life. No one took it from him. He laid it down willingly to accomplish his Father's will to give life to those who would believe. In the same way, we are to live intentionally sacrificial lives. We don't lament and complain and begrudge our dying. We don't resent the fact that we don't get what we want or can't keep what we have. We see our dying as a means to bless and serve others. We sacrifice ourselves to seek the higher good in another. "Goodness is something so simple: always to live for others, never to seek one's own advantage" (Dag Hammerskjold). "An act of pure faith is the death of what we love most so it may be offered to the loved one because only love is stronger than death."<sup>1</sup> Dying to self is probably the most difficult thing we are called to do as we follow Jesus. "It is too easy to kill others, it is so difficult to die to oneself."<sup>2</sup>

When my oldest daughter was little, she and I played a game in the swimming pool. She would hold on to the side while I tried to pull her away. Even as a child she was very strong, and it would take some effort to overcome her grip. Our natural tendency is to grab the things we love and hold onto them with everything inside us. Sometimes it takes quite an effort from God to pull us away while we keep clawing and scratching for something to hold onto, but eventually our grip will not hold.

We will lose everything at some point; it's just a matter of time. We can't hold onto our childhood, our athletic ability, our mental capacity or our loved ones. Sooner or later we are forced to let go. Finally, we are forced to let go of life itself. It's just a matter of time. Jesus tells us to start now. Don't focus on grabbing and keeping what you have. Let go of the side of the pool so you can swim in deeper waters. Live and die purposefully, intentionally and sacrificially.

Henri Nouwen writes: "Only very late do we learn the price of the risk of believing, because only very late do we face up to the idea of death. This is what is difficult: believing truly means dying. Dying to everything; to our reasoning, to our plans, to our past, to our childhood dreams, to



our attachment to earth, and sometimes even to the sunlight, as at the moment of our physical death.”<sup>3</sup>

There is agony in our dying, but there is ecstasy as well. As difficult as dying is, the results far outweigh the loss. For one thing, we gain a life we could never manage on our own. The result is a birthing of new life and new purposes. That is the great paradox of life: If you seek to gain your life you lose it; but if you lose your life you gain it. If we seek to retain and hold tightly to our life, there will be no fruit and we won't become who God wants us to be.

Another result is that we do not remain alone but with Jesus. We live in the presence of Jesus. The word “remain” also takes us back to chapter 1, where the disciples asked Jesus where he was remaining or staying. Jesus said, “Come and see.” “Remaining” means staying with Jesus in death and in life.

Another result is that our living and dying allow us to accomplish the same purpose as Jesus' living and dying, and that is to bear the fruit of eternal life and give this life to others. Most of the time, fruit in the Bible refers to character, e.g., the fruit of the Spirit. Certainly that is true in this passage in John. But in this context of Jesus giving up his life at the arrival of the Gentiles, we also see an emphasis on missions and evangelism. Faith and worship has to lead to outreach. Churches that lose missionary focus die. This is what Jesus does, and this is what he expects of us. This is one reason behind our starting a church in Willow Glen. We are not trying to expand and grow the company. We want to get smaller so that we can provide more opportunity for people in both Willow Glen and Cupertino to see Jesus. Nothing makes us happier than hearing someone say, “The Greeks want to see Jesus.”

So we are faced with a decision. Do we live in the life we think we can get or live in the life that Jesus can give? We must believe that if we let go of false life that God will give us true life. It is all a matter of faith. No one can do it for you, not even Jesus. The choice to be a Christian is the choice to die to self. But he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.

I can pinpoint the junctures where I was faced with decisions to die to myself in the face of the basic instinct to love my life. When we become Christians, we think we have it all figured out. We think we have given up our life to God. But in reality this is the beginning of a lifetime journey. God begins to reveal to us how much we love our life, and we realize how difficult it is to give it up and believe by faith that God will give us greater life.

This truth that Jesus gives is life-giving and liberating. Once we are willing to give up our life we are free from the fear of losing it. This truth is the key to marriage. How do two selfish sinners gain life in marriage? Not by arranging, controlling or planning, but by dying, by loving sacrificially to seek each other's good. This truth is the key to parenting. How will we serve selfish children and let them be who God intends them to be, let them experience life with all its pain and difficulty? How will our own life not be based on the outcome of theirs? Not by controlling or holding tight, but by dying intentionally, purposefully and sacrificially. Dying to self is the key to life in all of our relationships, at home and at work, in our neighborhoods and families. If you want to experience true freedom and true life, follow Jesus into death.

As I was reflecting on this text I recalled the Dickens' classic *A Tale of Two Cities*. In the story, Sydney Carton squanders most of his life. At the end, Carton's colleague Charles Darnay is sentenced unjustly to death. Darnay married the woman Carton loved and was the man he wanted to be. On the eve of Darnay's execution, Carton visits him in jail. He tricks him into changing clothes and drugs him unconscious. While Darnay and his family escape, Carton takes his place at the guillotine. But in giving up his life he finds meaning for his life: “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known.” The same is true for those who live in Christ. “God is always active in our lives. God always calls, always asks us to take up our crosses and follow... We do not have to go after crosses, but we have to take up the crosses that have been ours all along.”<sup>4</sup>

How is God speaking to you today? What are you holding onto that he wants you to let of? How is he asking you to die, and trust that he will bring life?

*O the wonderful cross, O the wonderful cross  
Bids me come and die and find that I may truly live.*

1 Carlo Carretto, *The God Who Comes* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1974), 23.

2 Carretto, *The God Who Comes*, 140

3 Henri Nouwen, *Seeds of Hope*. Edited by Robert Durback (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 146.

4 Nouwen, *Seeds of Hope*, 146.