

## **John 12:20-33**

### **The Lonely Victory of Jesus**

You learn a lot of things from toddlers, if you pay attention. I have a two-year-old granddaughter named Willamina. Willamina, who we've called Willa for two years, now tells everyone her name is Mina.

I get to be with her every Tuesday. And Sunday mornings aside, Tuesdays are my favorite day of the week.

Lately, I've found it doesn't do / to have too many preconceptions about what our day together will look like, because Mina knows what she wants—no, *needs*—to do.

Since my energy doesn't quite match up to hers, I'll often suggest reading a book, which she used to love to do. But these days, with no playmates of her own because of COVID, Mina has a real need for imaginary play with dolls.

She grabs my hand and pulls me in the direction she's going while announcing, "Mamie, go see Baby." And off we go to her room to tend to her baby doll-- feeding and consoling her. Later we may put little figures named Tommy and Stacey into a car to go on a trip while lonely little Mina tells me that the two plastic figures are friends. It's the only way during this time of social isolation that she can learn what it is to be friends with someone. Mina knows what she needs to do.

It's a similar resoluteness we see in Jesus in today's text. At this point in his ministry he is determined not to be distracted by anything less than God's will. He has taught, eaten with sinners, performed miracles galore, and been led to minister here and there.

But this day, now back in Jerusalem, he knows that THIS IS THE HOUR, above all others. This is THE HOUR to reveal his faithfulness to his Father. To focus on his Father and his Father's purpose for him, even in his suffering.

Listen now to today's New Testament passage from John 12:20-33 . . .

[John 12:20-33]

Having come to Jerusalem, there was no turning back for Jesus. The moment had come for God's purposes to be revealed. It was like he was standing in front of a billboard and it's all he could see.

I'm not sure why the request from the "Greeks" triggers this response from Jesus. I'm not sure why these Greeks, who seemed to know Philip, wanted to see Jesus.

But the request offers Jesus the opportunity to reveal the path that lay ahead. He was going to face down "the World" (*kosmos*), which Duke Divinity School's Charles Campbell helpfully identifies as "The System."

It was showdown time for Jesus vs. The System-- The moment when Jesus would face down the ruler of this world, and as a result, that ruler will be sent packing.

The way to be victorious, Jesus was convinced, was for his Father to glorify / not Jesus / but God's own self. That was Jesus' deep, gut-wrenching desire. . . . what all his life had come to. He knew what needed to happen: "Father, glorify YOUR name!"

But what is just as important to see is that Jesus says this right in the middle of his own suffering. It is similar to what will happen in the Garden

of Gethsemane, just before his arrest, when he says, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

Even those of us who have never known suffering / have learned a lot about it this past year. And since about the middle of the pandemic, we've heard people muse about what there is to learn from it. We've all asked, "How will life be different after COVID?" or more basically, "WILL life be different after COVID?"

Most of us have ramped up our technology skills during the pandemic. We've worshiped via technology, done schoolwork via technology, Session meetings, Book Clubs, etc. We've seen that a lot can be accomplished from the comfort of our homes thanks to Zoom and computer screens.

Then there's the increased time with families. Many have never spent so much time with each other as during this time of forced social isolation! For most families, that's been a good thing. For some, though, all that togetherness has led to fighting and heartbreak.

How will things be different after the pandemic?

As much as we've all prayed, our heavenly Father has NOT let this COVID cup pass from us. We've had to live through it, and some, of course, have had to die through it.

The biggest question remains: "How is God being glorified through it?" What that we have said or done during this hard time has brought God glory?

I wonder if part of the answer isn't that we've been able to practice what it means to glorify God during extreme duress. We've all felt pressure and constraints of one kind or another over the past year, but have we kept our faces turned toward God and toward what God is saying and doing AT THIS—UNPRECEDENTED FOR US— HOUR?

Maybe this is the first thing God has wanted for us during this time, to build up our spiritual muscles—remaining true to God, praising God, and attesting to God’s sure purposes—even in the midst of suffering.

Besides that, we’ve surely learned just how addicted we’ve been to the rewards of the world—to the kind of glory the world gives us. Most of us would have gotten to this point anyway, despite the pandemic. It happens for many around retirement time, when we start feeling irrelevant.

COVID has met us all face-to-face, though, and forced us to evaluate what all that busi-ness and striving and accumulation of wealth and stuff really means. How addicted have we been to our own accomplishments in the workplace and the praise that comes with them? How addicted have we been to the accumulation of wealth with more accumulation of wealth after that? How addicted have we been to keeping busy, busy, busy all our days, no matter the worth of the activity? How addicted have we been to increasing our steps or our running time?

Hindus learn about the stages of life, or *ashramas*. The third ashrama humans go through is *Vanaprastha* that usually starts around age 50. It’s when we purposefully focus less on professional ambition, and become more and more devoted to spirituality, service, and wisdom. This doesn’t mean that you need to stop working when you turn 50—something few people can afford to do—only that your life goals should adjust.

*Vanaprastha* is a time for study and training for the last stage of life.

I would say—during COVID times—we’ve all received a crash course in *Vanaprastha*, many prematurely.

Being forced to stay home by a virulent enemy has many of us asking questions about the way of life we left behind. Do we want to keep on like that, or do we want to make some changes?

Looking at the same thing from a different plane, from a Kingdom of God perspective, maybe we should be asking, not just how we want to improve our lives . . . maybe we should be asking: "What is God's purpose here; how is God glorified by our yearlong experience and the choices that now lay ahead of us?"

Another gift the pandemic has brought us, surely most of us, is an increased familiarity with death and hopefully a sense that death is a part of life. I've heard that children of past generations, especially those who grew up on farms, were exposed to death on a much more regular basis than our own kids are. They knew how the experience of death fit into the larger experience of life.

During COVID we all got a crash course on death and "grew" our attitudes and feelings about it.

In an article in *The Atlantic*, Arthur C. Brooks reports on a 2017 research experiment at several American universities. Volunteers were recruited "to imagine they were terminally ill or on death row, and then to write blog posts about either their imagined feelings or their would-be final words. The researchers then compared these expressions with the writings and last words of people who were actually dying or facing capital punishment.

"The results . . . were stark: The words of the people merely imagining their imminent death were three times as negative as those of the people actually facing death—suggesting that, counterintuitively, death is scarier when it is theoretical and remote than when it is a concrete reality closing

in. The concrete reality of death is what we have been experiencing during the pandemic.

“For most people, actively contemplating our demise so that it is present and real (rather than avoiding the thought of it with mindless pursuits)—contemplating our death can make it less frightening. When we embrace death we remember that everything is temporary, and we can step out from there to make each day of life more meaningful.

E.M. Forster wrote, “Death destroys a man, but the idea of Death saves him.” Christians who face the reality of death draw close to the one who gives us our first breath and who is there when we draw our last breath.

A final thing I want to touch on here—a gift of God from the pandemic—is that we’ve been reminded how important it is to dedicate time to relationships. For instance, I don’t like to initiate phone contact with friends, even though I know I should and am always glad when I do. It’s still hard for me.

But during the pandemic I made many more phone calls than usual to friends. I knew how lonely I was, living alone and feeling like a princess imprisoned in a tower . . . and I knew my friends must be feeling lonely, too, so I reached out to make that connection. I know I’m not unique in that.

We’ve also seen the benefits of spending time with loved ones in our immediate circle. We’ve enjoyed walks, jigsaw puzzles, cooking, watching movies, and just plain good talks with them. We’ve been reminded how important it is to dedicate time to relationships.

If during the pandemic . . .

- we've learned just how addicted we've been to the rewards of the world, if . . .
- we've gained familiarity with death and hopefully a sense that death is a part of life, and if . . .
- we've been reminded how important it is to dedicate time to relationships . . .

And if we've done all that while being, like Jesus, focused on the Lord and the Lord's purpose for us . . . and if we've been aware that all of our suffering is done within the even bigger story of what God's doing in the world — *then we've also been learning* what it means to sort through priorities until we find life's number one priority, which is in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

“to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Commonly, in seeking to glorify God, we begin by seeking the face of the God-man we know, Christ Jesus. Then, in his presence we loose our tight hold on our lives, and begin to merge our stories with Christ's own eternal story, so that we begin to get the feel of what Paul is talking about when he says, “the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me.”

In Christ, with Christ, and with Christ in us— a new kind of life has been made possible for us during the pandemic. And a new kind of humanity has hopefully been born, especially if we articulate that new vision that's born out of threat and hardship.

In turn, Christ's passion, his resurrection and ascension—when we live through them with him—tell us that the critical battle with the power of

darkness has been fought and won. It has been won, not by us, but by the One who died for us out of utter dedication and faithfulness to his faithful Father God.