

Misunderstanding

John 12:20-33

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27 “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” 30 Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Have you ever been misunderstood? No matter what you did or said brought the wrong response. It was like you were speaking a different language from the people you are speaking to. My husband Leroy and I often speak different languages or have different meanings in the words we speak. On Wednesday he was trying to tell me he was bringing home lunch and would need my assistance to bring the items in; I thought he was talking about groceries he wanted to share with a friend. Sometimes it gets even more complicated. He worries about me and I misunderstand his questioning as trying to control me. He misunderstands my lack of calling as disrespect and disregard for his feelings. Then we have to laugh, because after 40 years of marriage we still misunderstand each other’s motives. Imagine Jesus’ frustration when, near the end of his earthly mission and ministry, the disciples, the crowds, and the religious leaders continued to misunderstand him.

This text is situated dramatically in the context of the festival of Passover, preceded by events such as Jesus' raising of Lazarus, Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet, and the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The responses to these events are intensely divided, as crowds of people form to hear Jesus, while others plot to destroy him, and some disciples become more reverent while within the heart of one of them, Judas, irritation escalates. All eyes—including those of some Gentiles—strive to focus on Jesus.

The first misunderstanding we encounter is by some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover festival. Crowds have previously flocked to Jesus (4:1; 6:2; 6:24) or heard and interacted with him (7:20). What makes the visit of this delegation of Greeks remarkable? Their step-by-step approach highlights the unusualness and importance of their coming: they approach Philip (12:21); Philip speaks with Andrew (12:22a); then Andrew and Philip approach Jesus together (12:22b).

Who are these "Greek" seekers? The disciples and some in the crowd would recall the speculation of Jesus' opponents that he might go to the Diaspora and teach "the Greeks" (7:35). These may have been either Hellenistic Jews or the Gentiles among whom they lived or Gentile proselytes and seekers among those coming up to Jerusalem for the feast (12:20). Jesus sees the Greeks as an advance scouting party of the "all [people]" who will be drawn to him when he is "lifted up" (12:32). They represent the "other sheep" that he will bring in (10:16). Their coming prompts a discourse by Jesus to his disciples—to Philip and Andrew, and we are blessed to listen in what he said to them and us.

But these Greeks thought they had to be properly introduced to Jesus. They didn't just join the crowd following Jesus. There was nothing wrong with their request, but too often people assume there is some magic formula to having a meeting with Jesus. Rather than coming just as we are with sincere hearts and

minds to follow him, we think we have to be introduced by some special preacher, in some special season, or on some special day. Jesus wants a relationship with us at any and all times. The invitation is an open one, as Jesus said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

The Greeks coming causes a powerful statement by Jesus to his disciples regarding not only what is to happen but also what it means. “The hour has come,” says Jesus. It is an hour to which his whole life has been leading. It is clearly important to him that his disciples have some understanding of this hour, yet what he offers them is an oddly jarring proverb. Grains of wheat must in a sense die to what they are if they are not to remain alone and fruitless. And so it is that human individuals must in a sense die to our love for our own lives, lest in loving ourselves above all else we lose our lives and paradoxically destroy ourselves. This “hour” of which Jesus speaks, then, sounds like a cautionary and foreboding tale of diminishment, destruction, and loss—even though it may have a happy ending. Indeed, as the hour comes, Jesus says that his very soul is troubled. Yet he will not ask to be spared this hour, for it bears the reason of his life.

I wonder how many of his disciples and members of the crowd misunderstood and still thought Jesus was talking about agriculture? How many missed the point that he would be the one, like the grain of wheat, would need to die in order to live? Here the decisive point is that death must precede life. The seed that does not fall to the ground and die remains or abides alone—in contrast with the abiding of the Spirit with the believer (14:17) and of the believer and Jesus in each other (15:4–10), both of which imitate Jesus’ abiding in the Father’s love (15:11).

Here we have a central revelation of God’s wisdom and action to those who can understand it. The person who “hates” his or her own life (soul, self, or life) will gain eternal life (v. 25). This is another statement of Jesus that we easily

misunderstand. The emphasis is on loving or hating one's own life, which is identified as life "in this world." We know that Jesus is on a mission in the world because God loves the world (3:16) and that the world does not recognize Jesus (1:30) but hates him (7:7). It is no good to love ourselves or the world as alienated from God; the only good way to love either is to love them in Jesus, in whom we gain life through death. We must "hate" our own, and the world's, alienation from God. Jesus is the first to show us the meaning of the "hatred" of life "in the world" that leads to eternal life.

The arrival of "the hour" (cf. 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 13:1; 17:1) brings anguish to Jesus (12:27; cf. Ps. 6:3). He first prays to be delivered from the hour (12:27; cf. Mark 14:35–36 and par.) but then prays, "Father, glorify your name" (v. 28). This prayer evokes the "voice from heaven." The Father himself audibly confirms Jesus' prayer and by implication his whole mission and message. The voice confirms Jesus' prayer, saying yes to "glorify your name." Was there a "voice from heaven" or merely a "sound from the sky?" Some bystanders heard merely thunder; others thought an angel was speaking to Jesus (v. 29). Commentator Rodney Whitacre notes: "There is ambiguity to everything divine in this world, and this ambiguity tests hearts." Jesus says the voice came not for his own sake but for theirs (v. 30); but the enemies of God never hear God's voice (5:37).

Understand these words of Jesus as they were being spoken appeared beyond the capability of Jesus' closest disciples, and it would prove through centuries to be no less difficult for theologians and simple believers to explain. Yet in the end, with the experiences of Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Spirit, the disciples did come to understand it; and believers have grasped it without exhausting its mystery.

Clearly the "hour" is the time of Jesus' completion of his mission to bring salvation to the world. Some theologians through the centuries have tried to make

sense of Jesus' saving action as a sacrifice on the order of a blood offering to an offended and angry God, a price exacted in order to reverse a catastrophic disobedience somewhere in the depths of human hearts of the past and present. But the tradition has not been satisfied with this way of explaining the "hour," for it does not adequately reflect the God revealed in and by Jesus Christ as a God of mercy and love. Twentieth-century theologians like Karl Barth and Karl Rahner argue, rather, that the initiative for reconciliation comes from God's own self. The Fourth Gospel makes it clear that the incarnation of God is the first movement in God's action to reconcile humanity to Godself; it is an action of self-emptying, which will be consummated in a final free, surrendering love. In and by this action, Jesus reveals the kind of God whose love can no longer be questioned. No matter what the forces of evil will do to Jesus, they will not take from his heart his love for God.

Within this mystery of salvation and ultimate glory, there lies one more message for the disciples of Jesus. "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor" (v. 26). The disciples, too, will be "delivered up" to forces of evil. They will be asked to drink the same cup Jesus drinks, to carry the same cross, to make the same absolute surrender—not to evil, but to God. The cross symbolizes the potential participation of all human beings in the new life of Jesus the Christ. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (v. 32). By the cross, life and love are offered to Jesus' disciples, the cross attracts and it heals (John 3:14–15). Jesus' action is not a private action; because in his life we "abide." Cross and resurrection, suffering and transformation, loss of life but faithful love: "if [the grain of wheat] dies, it bears much fruit" (v. 24). **Margaret A. Farley and James D. Ernest**

In our prayers, will we ask God for deeper understanding of God's will and purpose, so we will not be guilty of misunderstanding the riches of God's love story for us?