

Lift Up! **John 12:20-33**

Let me begin today's sermon with a question. "Do you think that through the ups and downs of history, humanity is progressing towards a better society or do you think it is deteriorating day by day?" I know there is no easy answer to this question. In fact, there is no THE answer to this question. There are undeniable advancements in various fields such as technology, medicine, human rights, and education. But at the same time, there are also significant setbacks that humanity faces today. We face environmental degradation, global warming, extreme political polarization and unrest, wars and increasing possibility of another World War. I do not know if humanity is progressing towards a better world, but I feel that we are in a downward moment in history. Military tensions in the world are rising and thousands of civilians have lost their lives in recent wars. Since last October, more than thirty-one thousand Palestinians have been killed, and seventy-two thousand people have been injured. Many experts are concerned about the real risk of genocide in Gaza, but those in power do not want to end the war. The irony of this war is that the U.S. government has pushed the Israeli government for a cease-fire while continuing to send bombs and military weapons. As the presidential election approaches, the United States is also divided in terms of political positions and there seems to be no middle ground. Not only here in the United States, but in many other places in the world, we witness the rise of political extremism that does not tolerate difference and threatens democracy. Sometimes, I feel that the weight of our greed and collective sin is dragging us down into this abysmal situation. We need to find a way to lift up these dismal situations, but we often feel that we are not capable of changing the world. However, as Methodists we are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world! Can we lift up the world to a better place? Of course! Jesus taught us how in today's scripture.

A Time to be Glorified

Today's scripture begins with an ordinary scene. Some Greeks came to Philip and requested to see Jesus. Jesus was a kind of celebrity in Jerusalem and many people wanted to see him. Some people were looking for healing. Some wanted to listen to his inspiring preaching. Maybe some of them wanted to have an argument with this famous but controversial prophet. So, for many reasons, meeting new people with diverse personal backgrounds and intentions was a part of daily life for Jesus and his disciples. Receiving requests from people to meet Jesus was an ordinary occurrence for his disciple. When Philip and Andrew heard that some Greeks wanting to see Jesus, they might have said, "Well, just another ordinary day", but unlike the disciples, Jesus understood that the Greeks coming to him was a sign from God and he realized that his time had come.

Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." We don't often use this word, "glorify." When do we use the word 'glorify?' People often glorify athletes. Michel Jordon, Tom Brady, Babe Ruth. "Glorified" means "represented in such a way as to appear more ELEVATED or special." In our society, someone is glorified for their exceptional achievement. To be glorified, one must be outstanding, special and extraordinary. It often means one must be superior and stand above other people through winning competitions. However, Jesus taught us another way of being glorified, that is not through winning competitions.

When the Bible says Jesus was 'glorified,' it means something specific about his sacrifice, death and resurrection. Jesus said, "I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever." Being lifted up to eternity and glorified was not winning over others, but giving one's whole being for something bigger than oneself. "It is about giving ourselves over to a larger truth, a deeper reality, a more profound life than the one we find at the end of our noses and fingertips."¹ It is breaking the boundaries we have created and deeply re-connecting with others around us for the sake of God.

Why is the world torn apart and engaged in brutal wars? Why do some countries struggle with hunger while other nations struggle with the issue of obesity? Theologically speaking, the primary reason is that we

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depths-of-love/fifth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fifth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-preaching-notes>

forget God created us as interdependent beings, relating to God and other beings. We exist because of God's breath of life. We owe our life to God. We also owe our lives to other beings in this world. But we forget about that profound relationship that sustains our lives. Unfortunately, we often forget this truth and live within the small space inside of our own shells of ego.

However, when we retreated into our small world and are only concerned about our own wellbeing or the interests of our nation, what we get is the world we see today. When wealth is excessively concentrated into a small number of people and nations, humanity is diminished and the weight of human greed enlarged. When the only concern of nations is pursuit of their own interests, humanity suffers from the weight of violence and wars. You have heard, "absolute power corrupts absolutely." When power and prestige are concentrated in a small group of elites, humanity declines under the weight of corruption and oppression. When we lose sympathy towards the suffering of our neighbors, we are losing humanity.

Holding lives lightly enough

Jesus doesn't want us to live for ourselves. Rather he wants us to live beyond ourselves, living more deeply, living through giving ourselves away, living through service. In other words, Jesus wants us to find our lives by holding them lightly enough to lose them. This is a way of lifting up ourselves, humanity and the world.

Do you know the worship theme of this Lenten season? It is "what are you up to?" Let us watch a short movie clip that explains the theme and purpose of our worship series. [ppt] As you have just seen, the main worship theme is "What R U Up 2?" and the anchor image is hot air balloons. Have you ever ridden in a hot air balloon? I have not had an opportunity yet but it's on my bucket list. Do you know how it rises up? I am not a science person like Carl Bishop Jr., but I understand how hot air balloons rise into the air. It relates to the physics of air density. Hot air is lighter than cool air because the warmer air is, the less dense it becomes. And less dense air surrounded by more dense air will seek to rise.

Figuratively speaking, when we accept God's love, heated by the flame of the Holy Spirit, we realize that our lives are not all about us despite what various advertisers may want us to believe. When we believe that life is about something bigger than ourselves, we can break our boundaries and extend our reach. When we stretch out, the density of our lives becomes less and can rise up for the sake of our neighbors, communities, and God. How? I don't know but it's God's physics of life density.

In our Lenten book study, Bishop Tom Berlin shared a story of how God lifted someone up through his church. His childhood friend Becky was diagnosed with cancer and had to go through cancer treatments and surgery. Because it happened during the pandemic, she was isolated and felt very lonely in the off hours. He shared his concern with his church and his congregation made her a prayer blanket. He told Becky that he and his church members had prayed for her as they made the blanket. She was so moved by this thoughtful gift. She was only allowed to take one item with her when she entered the hospital room and she chose the blanket. Since Becky was "spiritual but not religious," she did not really go to church, but in her room, she prayed to God to show some sign that God was near.

A nurse entered her room and said, "That is a beautiful blanket! Is that the comfort item you chose to bring in?" Becky replied, "It's from my friend Tommy's church in Virginia. It is a prayer blanket they made for me." Then, the nurse replied, "you don't mean Tom Berlin at Floris UMC, do you?" Becky was shocked. "How did you know that?" The nurse answered that she used to be a member of that church. She said, "I am going to be your nurse and I want you to know that you are going to get excellent care while you are here." Isn't that an amazing story?

Instead of obsessing over our own concerns and lives, we can break our boundaries and extend our reach and God will do the rest. When our lives are heated with the love of Christ, our lives become lighter and less dense and we will be lifted for eternity. My beloved Asbury family, instead of giving something up during this Lenten season, let's be up to something good for the sake of the world, for the sake of our communities! Find one thing you can do and keep doing it for good for the sake of God! Amen.