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Festival of the Holy Cross
14 September 2014
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Num 21:4-9; 1 Cor 1:18-25; Jn 12:20-33

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

*“Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks.
So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him,
‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’” (Jn 12:20-21)*

This is a profound request.
Their desire isn’t just for a glimpse—
to catch a sight of whatever physical characteristics he had—
they wanted to see *who He really is*.

Today, there are about as many images of Jesus as minds to think of Him and pens to draw Him.
Everyone, it seems, has a Jesus of his own liking.

But what sort of Jesus were these Greeks to see?
And if this request was made today—*sir, we want to see Jesus*—how would you respond?

As you consider this, I’ll let you in on my own experience with this question.
It wasn’t until the end of high school, or even early college that I, too, wanted to *see* Jesus.
And there was a song that really resonated with this desire, it went something like this:

*“Open the eyes of my heart, Lord,
open the eyes of my heart.
I want to see you.
I want to see you.
To see you high and lifted up,
shining in the light of your glory.
Pour out your pow’r and love
as we sing “Holy, holy, holy.” (Paul Baloche, 2000)*

I’m sure many of you have heard this song—though you might be surprised to hear me sing it!
But even if you hadn’t heard it before, what sort of Jesus is pictured here?
It seems pretty clear, right?

It’s the victorious, resurrected, triumphant, *heavenly* Jesus.
It’s the glowing Jesus, with bright white clothes, that we glimpsed in the Transfiguration,
and beheld at His resurrection, and will see again when we die and meet Him.

What’s fascinating, to me, is how the words of this song could be so accurate and Scriptural,
yet present such an *opposite* picture as that from the very Scriptures the picture comes!

I haven’t read anywhere that it was today’s Gospel that inspired this song.
But the words he used had to come from here.
Listen, again, to today’s Gospel:

*“Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...
And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’” (Jn 12:23, 32)*

“*Glory*,” “*lifted up*,” “*draw all people to myself*.”

When does this happen?

When is Jesus’ hour?

When do we see the glory of God?

St. John tells us plainly,

“*He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.*” (Jn 12:33)

It’s the cross.

The cross is His *glory*, the cross is His *hour*, the cross is where He *draws all people to Himself*.

The cross is His answer to those Greeks who say,

“*Sir, we’d like to see Jesus.*”

For without the cross, you’ve got the wrong picture of Jesus—you’re seeing the wrong thing.

Luther rightly said, *Crux sola est nostra theologia* (the Cross alone is our theology).

And a dear professor once said,

“If the cross is not in the sermon, it is not a Lutheran sermon.

Or if you take the cross out of the sermon, and it can get along just as well without it,
it is not a Lutheran sermon.”¹

The Holy Cross is our victory:

it is *the power of God* (1 Cor 1:18),

the defeat of sin, death, and the devil,

the triumph of good over evil,

the cure for our sin,

the healing of the nations,

the hour of God’s glorification and the place where all is set aright.

Therefore, St. Paul says today, “*we preach Christ crucified*” (1 Cor 1:23).

The Christ who saves is the one on the Holy Cross.

But even though we commemorate this Festival Day of the Holy Cross,

and even though we Christians make the sign of the Holy Cross every morning and evening,

and though we wear the cross around our necks, and hang it in our homes,

and even name our churches after it,

we do not go back to the cross to see Jesus.

Certainly, it is the crucified Jesus we see—but we don’t travel back in time for it.

And we don’t try somehow to relive or get contemporary with it.

Our Lord isn’t back there, today; but here.

There on the cross was the hour of glorification and the place where victory was won.

But here is the hour and the place where what was won on the cross is delivered to you.

Here He is, located in time and place, with His Word

in the preaching of the Gospel, and the feeding of His body and blood for you.

¹ Norman Nagel, *Selected Sermons of Norman Nagel: From Valparaiso to St. Louis* (St. Louis: CPH), 290.

We don't go back to the cross,
 but the Christ who was crucified for us and for our salvation,
 comes to us, bringing with Him His victory and our redemption.

Just as the Israelites of old, bitten by the poisonous snakes,
 looked to the Bronze Serpent, *lifted up* on a pole, and were healed;
 so also do we, bitten by the word of the Law that shows our sin,
 look to the law's fulfillment and completion in Christ crucified.

And the Christ who was lifted up for us, glorified for us, is the Christ who comes *to us*, here.
 It is the crucified Christ we preach—there isn't any other.

And if the Greeks come to you today, wanting to *see Jesus*,
 don't point them to heaven above,
 or tell them how great it'll be when they die;
 give them the lifted-up-on-the-cross-Jesus
 and who now comes to us in Word and Sacrament.

If you want to see Jesus, be in Church around the Word.
 That's where He is—again, not just to catch his physical characteristics,
 but to see and believe and be healed and live.

And when you see and believe Christ crucified,
 you quickly find that His crucified life has been united to yours as well.
 For He says, "*where I am, there will my servant be also.*" (Jn 12:25)

You in Christ; Christ in you; and it's all on account of the Holy Cross delivered to you.
In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit