

“The Way to Glory”
John 12:20-26
May 3, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We continue, this morning, in the Gospel of John.

Last Lord’s Day we considered Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the time of the Feast of Passover. The people gathered along the road and praised Jesus, hailing him as a king – even as the Messiah. Jesus, in entering the city as he did, confronted their expectation for the Messiah, evoking Zechariah chapter nine.

At the end of that passage, and right before the passage we come to this morning, the Pharisees, who were opposed to Jesus, turn to one another in frustration, because, they say, the world has gone after Jesus.

And with that we come to this morning’s text: John 12:20-26.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

^{12:20} Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹ So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, you are our hiding place and our shield;
we hope in your word.
Help us to turn from all false ways,
and keep instead the commandments of you, our God.
Uphold us according to your promise, that we may live,
and let us not be put to shame in our hope.
Hold us up, that we may be safe
and have regard for your statutes continually.
For we know we will one day stand before you and give an account,
and so, with that in mind, help us now to attend to your word.
Grant this for Jesus’s sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:114-117, 120]

At the center of our text this morning is the topic of glory.

In what appears (at first) to be a non sequitur, Jesus declares in verse twenty-three, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” The first focus of this text seems to be the glory – the glorification (in a sense) – of Jesus Christ.

But then it becomes clear that the talk of glory is not limited to Jesus. Because Jesus adds in verse twenty-six that as he is glorified, those who follow him will be as well, and they too will be honored by God the Father – meaning that they too will receive glory.

Glory and the reception of glory, and being in a state of being glorified – a destination of glory – this is what is at the heart of our passage this morning.

But Jesus has some surprising things here to say about glory. And that is what I want to focus on this morning.

So this morning, as we look at this text together, we will consider three things.

First, we will consider the destination of glory.

Second, we will consider the road to glory.

And third, we will consider the caravan to glory.

So: the destination of glory, the road to glory, and the caravan to glory.

First is the destination of glory.

And what our text does, right off the bat, is that it confronts our vision of glory – it confronts the destination we are aiming for.

Let me explain what I mean. The key is the apparent non sequitur between verses twenty through twenty-two and then verses twenty-three through twenty-six.

Verses twenty through twenty-two flow very naturally from what came before. Remember, in the section right before this one, we had the triumphal entry. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the Jews who had gathered for the Feast of Passover in Jerusalem come out to him, and they are waving palm branches, and they are crying out “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the king of Israel!” Jesus is receiving such praise and acclaim that even his enemies must admit it – and they say to one another “The world has gone after him!”

And they are right – even more right than they may have known. Because in the very next verse, verse twenty, some Greeks show up and want to talk with Jesus. Now, by calling them “Greeks” John is not saying they were from Greece, but the focus is that they were not Jews – they were Gentiles. They clearly had some respect for, and maybe even faith in, the God of Israel, because they had come for the Feast of Passover. And now they too want to see Jesus. They may have come to Philip first because he might have felt the most accessible to them – either because they were from somewhere close to where he was from, or just because he had a more Greek-sounding

name. [Carson, 436-437] In any case, these people from outside Israel come and they too want to know Jesus.

And this must have been exciting for the disciples. They had just experienced the high of the acclaim of the Jews praising Jesus, and now Gentiles come wanting to know him too.

And so they go, and they tell Jesus, and Jesus's first response is: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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."

And you can imagine that Philip and Andrew must have been confused. And you could imagine that sort of reaction from them for a number of reasons. But key among the reasons why they may have been surprised was Jesus's contradiction of what was likely their and everyone else's concept of glory.

Because they thought they were already in a state of glory ... and then Jesus tells them that glory is coming, and that it will look very different from what they expected.

Let me explain what I mean.

The crowd from Bethany was praising Jesus and serving him as heralds. The crowd coming out from Jerusalem was praising Jesus and serving him as worshippers. The crowd of Gentiles was now honoring Jesus by coming and seeking to serve him as followers. All these people were serving Jesus and lifting him up. And *that* is how we tend to think of glory ... isn't it?

Ask yourself that question in your own case: What is the destination of glory that you seek? What is the glorious state of life that you long for? What is the fantasy you have of what you wish your life was like, that makes you smile and feel at peace and just want to sigh with satisfaction? What is your picture of personal glory?

If you're honest ... isn't it a picture of other people serving you? It's a picture of others blessing you – right?

If you're married, isn't it a picture where your spouse finally serves you and does for you all the things you've always wanted them to? If you're a parent, isn't it a picture where your kids finally bless you by doing all the things you're always asking them to do? If you live with your parents, isn't it a picture where your parents finally act in the ways you've wanted them to act? If you think of your friends, isn't it a life where your friends provide for you what you've always wanted from them? If you have a career, isn't it a picture where the people you work with give you the support, or the credit, or the acclaim you've always desired from them?

We could go on, but whatever setting may come first to your mind, my bet is that when you think of glory – when you think of your idea of the good life – it is a life in which others serve you, and bless you.

And Jesus seems to have that in John twelve – particularly in verses twelve through twenty-two. He has people praising him and serving him and blessing him. He has something of the glory that

his disciples must have been longing for him (and for them) to have for years leading up to that moment.

And it's just at that moment that Jesus basically says, "Okay, *now* I know that its time for me to be glorified." In other words, he seems to say it hasn't happened yet, but that now he knows it's coming.

And then Jesus says what it will look like. And what he says it will look like, in verse twenty-four, is *him* bearing fruit for others. It's *him* serving and blessing other people. *That* is what his glory looks like.

Because in verse twenty-four he says, "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.*"

Bearing fruit is what glory looks like for Jesus. And let's think about fruit for a moment. We mentioned this a few months ago when we looked at Psalm 1. Fruit is not for the one bearing the fruit. Fruit does not bless the tree. Fruit blesses others. A tree bears fruit, and the animals and the people who receive the fruit from that tree are the ones who are blessed – not the tree itself. In the same way, a stalk of wheat bears much fruit – it yields a harvest – and the stalk does not then consume the grain it yields, but others do. Fruit blesses and serves others.

And Jesus says in verses twenty-three and twenty-four that his glorification – that the destination of glory that he is seeking – is *not* others serving and blessing him ... but it is *him* serving and blessing others – bearing fruit for them.

And that is counter to how we tend to think ... but if we reflect on this image Jesus has given us, we realize ... maybe it shouldn't be so counter-intuitive.

Because in many ways our glory is simply doing what we were made to do – or accomplishing what we were sent to accomplish.

Grain is made for many things, but chief among them is for it to produce more grain – to bear fruit. When grain is planted and it bears a harvest, it does what God created it to do all along, and it is its glory to do that.

In a similar way, Christ was sent to bless and to save his people. That was his purpose in coming. And it is his glory to do just that – it is his glory to be the savior to his people, for that is why he was sent.

And then we think of ourselves – of humanity. God made us and called us to love him and to love those around us. In other words, he called us to serve and to bless – to bear fruit for – those whom he has placed in our lives. Loving God and loving those around us are our deepest callings – they're what we were made for – they're part of how we bear God's image. And when we fulfill that calling, it is our glory.

But the first step in doing it is accepting it as our calling from God. The truth of our hearts is that we often don't want to be what we were made to be. We want to be served by others, rather than to serve. But if we were made to serve and to bless others, then we want something contrary to

what we were made for and called to. And living contrary to our nature and our calling cannot bring us true blessing – it will not actually bring us the glory we long for.

We need to begin by adjusting our aim. We need to begin by desiring to be people who will bear fruit to bless others rather than desiring to be people who primarily look for what they can get from others.

Let's consider this in concrete terms: What would it look like for you to arrive at a life of glory in your life as it is set up right now? In other words, what would it look like for you to obtain the kind of glory Jesus is seeking in this passage – glory that is rooted in bearing fruit that blesses others? What would it look like in your life right now? What would it look like in your marriage? What would it look like in your friendships? What would it look like in your relationship to your parents or your children? What would it look like in terms of your civic engagement? What would it look like at work? What would a life of glory look like for you?

Jesus knew that glory was not fundamentally rooted in his receiving acclaim from others – whether the Jews who praised him as he entered Jerusalem, or the Greeks who sought him afterwards. Jesus knew that his glory was in blessing and serving – in bearing much fruit for his people.

And the same is true for us.

So first, consider what the destination of glory – the life of glory – should look like for you, according to what Jesus says here.

That's the first thing to consider.

The second question to consider is: What is the road to glory?

What is the road to glory?

And here again, Jesus confronts our expectations.

Because we tend to think of the road to glory as incremental increase and improvement.

That can especially be true when it comes to our false views of glory, but we can fall into a similar way of thinking even when we accept Jesus's true view of glory.

Let's start with the road to our false views of glory. Think about your version of the vision we considered a few minutes ago, where you are satisfied because others – in one area of life or another – are serving you. This is your false view of glory. In your mind, how do you get there?

Well, more often than not, you aim for it, and then you pursue it incrementally. You start out low down in the hierarchy of things, or you start out lacking the service and blessing of others that you want, and then you pursue a path that step by step moves you up to getting more and more of it. You build it up over time. And with each step that you move closer to your goal, the better it feels. You ascend, over time, to it.

And even though the true glory we are to seek – the glory Jesus presents to us here of bearing fruit that blesses others – even though that destination of glory is so different from the false glories we often seek, we still tend to pursue it in a similar way.

Let's say we accept Jesus's vision of the good life – the life of glory. And we increasingly imagine our life conforming to his pattern of bearing fruit to bless others. I think we still tend to imagine the path there as one of aimed incremental improvement.

We imagine a gradual ascent. And we can think of it being a pleasant path. We can sort of imagine ourselves hovering over the difficulties or sufferings of service. We think of ourselves a bit more detached from it. We imagine a peace that keeps the difficulties from really touching us as we advance in serving others. We imagine a pleasant upward path. Maybe one with hard work, yes – but still one with a clear trajectory: we set our aim at an upward, glorious goal, and we advance.

And to that, Jesus says that the way to glory is down. The road to glory is death.

That's what Jesus says in verses twenty-three and twenty-four. In verse twenty-three he says he will be glorified, and then in verse twenty-four he says, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." And in turning to the grain of wheat, Jesus alludes to a pattern that God wrote into creation itself ... but a pattern that is really quite odd if you think about it.

Imagine observing an ancient farmer if you knew nothing about agriculture or biology. You see a man who is trying to figure out how to feed his family. And he has a sack of grain. He could use it to make bread, you think. He could use it to feed his family. The answer, at least for the next few days, is right there in his hand. You watch him to see what he'll do with it. And you watch, with some confusion, as he takes the sack and he leaves his home and walks out to a nearby field. And then you see him proceed to throw that nutritious food all over the ground. And not just on the surface of the ground, where he might at least come to his senses and pick it up again – no, he breaks up the ground as well, in order to make sure the food gets buried.

If you saw that without knowing any more, you'd think he was insane. The man needs food. And he had some. And he took it and threw it in the dirt and buried it. What a waste.

If you really think about it, planting and harvesting is counterintuitive. You take food you already have, and you bury it in the hopes of getting more.

But that is the glory of the grain – to go into the earth in order to sprout even more grain. It is God's wonderful design.

And Jesus tells us here that God has put a similar design into us – and that the shape of Christ's calling has a similar arch as well.

Christ has entered triumphally into Jerusalem and things are looking up for the disciples. But the road to glory for Jesus is not a steady incline. The road instead will take a counter-intuitive turn. The road up to glory will plunge down into death itself.

For Jesus, the road to glory is the road to the cross and then to the tomb.

Jesus will bear the fruit of eternal life for his people. But to bear that fruit for them, like a grain of wheat, he will need to die. He will die on the cross to pay for their sins, and he will be buried in the tomb. But from his burial he will break forth again in new life – new life not only for himself, but new life that feeds and sustains all of his people, and communicates his eternal life to them as well.

And as Jesus makes clear in the verses that follow, the path to glory is the same for us. It is a path of dying to ourselves.

Bearing fruit that blesses others – living the good life, living a life of glory – means dying to ourselves. And dying is not pleasant. Dying does not feel good. Dying is not an incremental incline. At the moment, dying to ourselves feels like the opposite direction we want to go. It is a plunging down into self-sacrifice when we want to be moving up towards contentment and self-satisfaction. It is a disappearing into the earth when we want to be held up to be seen by others.

It is not the kind of service we would choose – where we set the terms and where we get the benefits we want without having to give up too much ourselves. It is instead the acts of service we don't want, the ones that feel like death and burial to us.

It is a willingness, as Jesus describes in verse twenty-five, to give up what we have in the hopes of what God will make of those things we give him. When Jesus speaks of hating this life, he does not mean that we despise the things of this life, but that our desire for and our love for the eternal things that will come of our sacrifice, so far outweighs our love for the things of this world, that it looks like we hate it.

Think about it: The man who takes his sack of grain and throws the grain on the ground and tramples it under the earth looks like he hates that grain. In truth, he cares more for the harvest it will yield than he does for the value of the grain as it is.

And so with us. Christ tells us that the life of glory, the life of fruitfulness for others, is not just a good life, but it is a life with him. And as that truth dawns on us more and more, we are to see how much more valuable an eternity with Jesus is than even the very best things we have in this life. As we see that, we become more and more willing to sacrifice those things – willing to bury them – in the desire to see what eternal things Christ will grow out of them. Taken in its fullness, we are willing to die even to ourselves that Christ might make us new in and with him.

The glory that Jesus calls us to is a life of bearing fruit for God and for others – both now and into eternity with Christ.

The road to that glory is the road down into death – the road of dying to ourselves, of taking up the cross.

All of which brings us to our third question: How can we travel this road?

How can we travel this road?

I think we often imagine ourselves traveling alone.

My wife and I recently saw the movie *1917*. Before I go on, I'll mention that it is a war movie and is rated R for violence and language.

The movie is historical fiction that takes place during World War I, and the basic plot is that two men are given orders to deliver a very important message to two battalions that are miles away, before those battalions walk into a trap. To do that the two men must travel alone through no man's land and miles of battlefield.

The movie is intense, and as the two soldiers travel, you feel how alone they are. They have their goal – their final destination – but they must make their own way there. They need to choose and forge a path in order to get there.

And I think that is something like how we often think of ourselves – whether it is how we think of ourselves seeking to reach false worldly glory, or even how we often think of ourselves as we strive for heavenly glory. Others come and go along with us, but we are each on our own journey. We must travel down to death on our own, if we are to make it up to life and glory.

Now, in some ways that metaphor can hold truths. And within certain scopes it can be helpful to reflect on.

But Jesus tells us here that, at a fundamental level, we have no hope of traveling the road to glory on our own. It is not possible.

He tells us that we do not travel it as lone soldiers trying to find a way through enemy land by ourselves. Instead, we travel in a convoy, as servants of the King.

This comes up in verse twenty-six. Jesus has already laid out that it is the calling of glory to bear fruit for others. He has already told us that the road to such glory is death. And then he says in verse twenty-six: “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”

The way we travel this road is not by striking out on our own. The way we travel this road is by staying close to Jesus. The way we travel this road is by joining Christ as members of – as servants in – his royal convoy, as he leads the way through death and into glory.

Here in John 12 it is Christ who leads the way to glory, through death. He is the ultimate grain of wheat that falls to the earth and bears much fruit, yielding a harvest.

We do not chart our own course, but we cling to him and follow him as he leads us on the way. We are not alone, neither are we the captains of the expedition. We do not need to know every twist and turn ahead so that we can plot out a course. We do not need to have mastered every possible obstacle before we set out. What we need is to stay close to the humble King who leads the way through the treacherous spiritual terrain from where we are to glory – both in this life and in the next.

And the way we do that is by taking our place in his royal caravan, as his faithful servants. That means that we follow where he leads. It means we listen as he instructs us with his word. It means

we follow his commands. It means we trust not ourselves, but we trust him as we travel along the difficult road.

And as we cling to Christ and follow in his caravan along with all the faithful, we will both plunge down into death with Christ our King, and we will arrive in glory with him, as well.

That is the pattern. How does it play out?

Well, first and foremost, it plays out in our salvation. We each seek after false glories – we each seek our own way in defiance of the calling and design of our God.

As we read in Genesis three, along with our First Parents we chose the forbidden fruit over the fruit of the tree of life. And so we have been cast out of God's glory.

But Christ, like a grain of wheat, gave himself over to death, and was buried in the earth. And from the tomb he then came forth, and he bore for his people the fruit of the tree of life, so that all who come to him and receive it will be blessed and will live with him forever. We will know him in this life, we will be with him at death, and when he returns, at the resurrection, we too, like seeds planted, will burst out of our graves and bear the fruit of everlasting praise to our God and King. This is the promise of the gospel. As we cling to Christ now, so we travel with him on the road to eternal glory.

But the gospel not only delivers us – it also transforms us. And that is what Christ does for all his people in this life as well. As we cling to Christ, he leads us on the path to glory here and now, making us more and more into the image of his glory – more and more into people who, like him, bear fruit to bless those around us, by giving ourselves over to death and then new life.

And so, if you have come to know Christ, if you have already trusted the fruit of his death and resurrection for eternal life, the next question you must ask is: Where is Christ at work in your life right now to make you more like him? Where is he leading you, as his servant, in his royal caravan, to bear fruit for others, by dying to yourself?

And let's get specific: How is he doing that right now, in May 2020, in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 lockdown?

Each of us is struggling with a range of emotions right now, and each of us is struggling in different ways with all that is going on.

But one thing that I think is common to many of us is that we are mourning the loss of our pursuit of false glory. Aren't we?

Those self-centered dreams where we are being served and blessed by others – they sort of just evaporated as possibilities for right now, didn't they? I mean, they may come back ... but they're gone for now. Whether your dream centered on achievement, or comfort, or freedom, or some other plan that you had, it's gone for now. And maybe you can't do anything to pursue it right now ... or maybe you are limited ... or maybe you have opportunities, but you are so distracted by everything else that is going on that you can't seem to focus on those goals like you did before.

And it's not only that. Because in this season you may also find yourself suddenly being asked to die to yourself, and bear fruit for others, in ways you had not expected. Maybe it's by homeschooling your kids or the challenges of having them home all the time. Or, for those of you who are a bit younger, maybe it's by being stuck at home and needing to deal with your parents all the time. Maybe it's by dealing with tensions in your marriage or family that were under the surface before, but that have come out in the open now that everyone is cooped up together. Maybe it's by not having the people there for you who usually help you, and having to resist bitterness at being without them. Maybe it's that you think certain people should be reaching out to you, but God seems instead to be calling you to reach out to them or to other people. Maybe it is any number of things.

It's really easy to look at life right now and to be upset about the ways that people, or things, or events, are not serving us the way we want them to – I understand, I know that is the mindset I often find myself in. And there are real things to mourn, and there are real anxieties and cares – I'm not trying to minimize any of that.

But in the midst of all of that, where are the opportunities, big or small, for glory – for glory in the way that Jesus thinks of it – for glory in the sense of being the kind of people God made us to be? Where are there opportunities to die to ourselves, in ways big or small, in order to bear fruit for others? And how can you cling to Christ, and follow his command and his lead, in order to sacrificially love others and bear fruit in their lives that blesses them right now?

Christ, by giving himself over to death, has loved us, and glorified himself, and brought us eternal life. It is a free and gracious gift.

And part of that gift is to become people who, like him, are also willing to die to ourselves and bear fruit for others. We preach his gospel in both word and deed.

It's not an easy task – it's not an easy path. But Christians have been following it for centuries – not because they are so skilled and disciplined on their own, but because they have clung to their King, and stayed close to his royal caravan. For he knows the way. He has the power to get us there. And he will make us into who we were made to be: a glorious and fruitful people who serve those around them, and bear fruit for the life of the world.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Augustine. *Homilies on the Gospel of John*. "Tractate LI." Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First Series, Volume 7.

Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.

Wright, N. T. *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004.