

John 12:20-33
March 29, 2009

South Plains

Seize Your Moment

I think it was Andy Warhol who predicted that in the future everybody would have fifteen minutes of fame. I don't whether he was anticipating the arrival of Youtube or some other innovation. His prediction has caused a lot of us to wonder, "When am I going to get my fifteen minutes? And, will it be the kind of fame I want? When is it my moment?" When our time comes, we want to recognize and seize the moment because we want to make the most of it.

Last Tuesday night at the Albemarle County Planning Commission we got more than 15 minutes of fame. Not everything said was complimentary of South Plains although many of you testified eloquently about the good our church has done in the past and will do in future with Kirk Hall. It was quite a moment, and there's more to come.

In chapter twelve of John's gospel, Jesus announces that his time has come. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." His passion and resurrection. This is his moment. His moment of fame and glory is upon him, and he will seize it. That raises two questions: What kind of fame and glory is this? And What kind of fame of glory can we expect as Jesus' followers?

The answer may surprise us because according to the example of Jesus, the moment is not what we might expect. For Jesus, the hour of his glory begins with his passion, his arrest, his suffering and death. From chapter twelve forward, Jesus will be moving steadily toward the cross. He will be preparing his disciples for his death and departure. Chapter thirteen begins with the observation, "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart this world." His glory revolves around the moment of his sacrifice. He will be gloried in dying.

All around us, the Bradford Pear trees are blooming, the maple twigs are tipped with red, and all but one tree is bursting with the promise of new life. The single exception is the oak trees. You see, oaks are the last trees to lose their leaves. The white oak in my front yard is full of dead, brown leaves from last fall. The new greenery cannot appear until the old has fallen off. It's a rule of life. The old will die in order for the new to appear. Jesus reminds his disciples that a grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die in order to bear much fruit. Jesus himself must die in order to produce the new life of salvation. Why things have to work that way, I cannot tell you. It's the way God created the cycle of life that takes us to death and new life.

Sometimes a person has to be pushed to the wall by sacrifice before the meaning and direction of her life becomes evident. Major Tammy Duckworth was a helicopter pilot in Iraq before she was shot down by a

rocket propelled grenade. Every part of her body not covered by armor was either injured or lost. After her recovery, she campaigned for election to congress from Illinois walking on two artificial legs.

She calls the injuries her slap in the face. She was trapped inside the burning helicopter. Her buddies thought she was dead, but they went into the fire in order to retrieve her body. That was their rule: leave no body behind. She was so slippery with blood that they dropped her coming out. Only then did they realized she was alive. As she recovered through two years of rehabilitation, she had lots of time to think about her rescue and how she might respond to all that had happened. "You've got to be worthy of that effort," she said later. As she underwent the painful and exhausting process of learning to walk on two artificial legs, she realized that this accident was her moment: out of her loss must come some gain for others. She decided on a career of public service. After losing her race for elected office, she was nominated as assistant secretary of Veterans Affairs.

By the middle of John's gospel, Jesus knows that his end is near. He realized that the Palm Sunday shouts from the crowd were not his true glory. True glory would center on the cross. And, even when he triumphed over death, rising from the grave, the crowds did not support him. A few put their faith in the risen Christ, but many would not believe that God had glorified his Son by permitting his death and then raising him from the grave.

Jesus tries to explain this strange glory with an analogy and a prediction. The analogy compares his dying to the planting of a seed in the earth. The seed gives up its existence in order to produce more fruit. On a vacation to southwest Virginia I was surprised to learn that settlers traveling down the valley of Virginia deliberately crossed the mountains into Tennessee and Kentucky in the dead of winter. They chose to travel in winter because they needed to arrive in time for spring planting. No matter how hungry they were that winter as they struggled to bring wagons through snowy Cumberland Gap, they knew they could not eat all their corn and grain because they had to plant crops for the next season. That spring, they put the last of their precious grain supply in the ground where it decayed and eventually sprouted to produce food in their new home. That was their life. Just as their lives depended on their faith in putting that seed in the ground, our life in Christ depends on faith in his death. Just as new life came out of the ground, our life in Christ comes from his resurrection from the grave.

The prediction Jesus makes must have sounded incredible to his followers. "When I am lifted up," he said, "I will draw all people to myself." Lifted up on the cross, his death and resurrection made him available to all the world. Jesus confined his earthly ministry to Palestine. He focused on proclaiming the gospel of eternal life to his Jewish brothers and sisters. When his mother wanted him to provide wine for a wedding, he did it quietly,

protesting, “My hour has not yet come (2:4).” Now his hour had arrived. In his passion and death God would begin the campaign to take his message of life to the ends of the earth. By means of his dying, he would demonstrate both the depth and breadth of God’s love.

Death is a universal experience. Everyone in this room has a 100% chance of dying. Rich, poor, over-privileged, under-privileged, Christian and Muslim, black, white and colored, we all will experience death. When the Son of Man died; when the one who could have called for help from legions of angels instead spoke the simple words, “I am thirsty;” when he refused to save himself, at that moment we caught a glimpse into the heart of God. God loves us enough to be with us in dying, to so identify with us that he would die. This was Jesus’ moment. He seized this moment to identify with all humankind, with all the oppressed and suffering, so that all might have eternal life.

With a good publicity agent and or a little bit of luck, any of us might have fifteen minutes of fame. After all South Plains got on the front page of the Daily Progress, not once, but three times. I have a monstrous certificate that says I voiced the opening prayer one day for the Tennessee House of Representatives. I’m proud of that moment. But, that is not the kind of glory Jesus is calling you and me to seize. Even front page news for the church is not what God prizes.

Jesus invites us to share his glory with these words:

Those who love their life will lose it,
And those who hate their life in this world
Will keep it for eternal life.

Whoever serves me must follow me,
And where I am,
There my servant will be also.
Whoever serves me,
The Father will honor. (12:26)

The invitation to faith is an invitation to service, service without the applause and adulation the world expects. What happened last Tuesday night may be the most applause South Plains ever gets, the most this world has to offer. Jesus had his moment of transient glory when he entered Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel (12:13).” We’ll celebrate that moment next Sunday, and give Jesus the well-deserved honor of those praises. But, we also will know that his service the world in overcoming sin and driving out evil is not pictured in a triumphal process, but in a terrible passion on the cross.

Our service to God will be less demanding than the sacrifice Jesus endured, but it can be no less unselfish, no less giving. Last Tuesday night, God gave us a victory. Many of you sacrificed to be there. Most of the service we render to God, however, does not result in

obvious triumphs. It probably will not be as dramatic even when it costs something of us.

That's the reason the season of Lent is a solemn season in the church. Lent confronts us with Jesus' sacrificial service and asks each one of us to seize our moment of service. That's our flicker of glory as we identify with Jesus. It may come in a week we give for a mission trip, or the steady commitment to visit a nursing home patient. It may involve giving up some financial security, or simply sacrificing your place in the sun in order for another person to receive credit for a job well done. It could mean a change in career. More likely it would mean a different way of pursuing your career or retirement. For some it will last fifteen minutes and for others it will last a lifetime.

Whatever fame you enjoy, whatever your glory, your moment in God's eyes will be a moment of service. Our prayer is for grace to seize that moment for the glory of God.