

## **Into the Landscape: The System**

*A sermon preached on John 12:20-33 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on March 18, 2018*

Just a week or so ago, I was scrolling through my Twitter feed when I noticed that a good friend of mine from divinity school named Ben had posted a lovely photo from his visit to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D. C. I remember seeing it and noting how lovely it was — a young little African-American girl looking up awestruck at the huge portrait of former First Lady Michelle Obama. The next day, I was again scrolling through my Twitter feed when I spotted the photo again — and again and again, this time, shared by celebrities and news outlets and political leaders. It seems my friend Ben had captured a moment now immortalized in what we in the 21st century call ‘viral,’ resonating so much with the public because of what we see in the little girl who saw — looking intently in wonder at the hope of what could be.

This place of seeing is where we meet Jesus in the Gospel of John today, surrounded as he was by crowds who had flocked to him around the region. But today, it seems that word about Jesus had gone viral if you will, and people outside of the faith were intrigued by what they heard. The text tells us it was a delegation of Greeks who came to him by way of Philip and then Andrew. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” they said, this group of Gentiles arriving curiously to see if what they heard was true.

It’s to those Greeks that Jesus begins to speak, but as with any of the teachings of Jesus, it’s as if he’s looking over the tops of their heads into the ages of human history, past and future, with a word so timely and timeless.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” Jesus says and continues. “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 die, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life 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 will be my servant also.”

It is said that in the St. Paul’s Monastery on Mount Athos in the northeastern peninsula of Greece, there stands a sign that reads: “if you die before you die, you will not die when you die.”<sup>1</sup> As it is with seeds of grain dying before bearing fruit, death must precede life in order for there to be life. These type of enigmatic statements don’t just mark walls of monasteries, they pepper the ministry of Jesus: statements that call forth the reality that we must say no before we can say yes, be blind before we can see, lose what is now in order to gain what is not yet, exhibit power made perfect in weakness. These are the kind of words spoken by one who knows what lies ahead, one who knows his hour has arrived, one who knows the cross he will have to bear, one who knows it is his body that will soon be planted in a tomb. For you and I both know now what Jesus knew then: that before we get to Easter Sunday, we have to go through the depths of Good Friday. And I wonder: what will that hour demand of you and me?

Every now and again in my weekly sermon preparation, I will listen to a sermon or two on the same text I’m working on from another preacher. Sometimes I’ll just Google it, other times I’ll stumble upon one from various sermon prep sites I utilize. And occasionally, I’ll find a preacher I love and go

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, p104.

three years back in his or her preaching to the last time the passage came up in the lectionary (“lectionary” you may know to be the collection of biblical readings assigned to each Sunday over a three year cycle).

Often times my listening happens while I’m doing something else – washing dishes, folding laundry – and this week was no exception. With Josh and the kids playing outside and the sweet potatoes I was prepping for dinner in front of me, I dug back through the archives of my former pastor’s preaching to hear the Joe Phelps take on John 12. I listen along to the familiar cadence of this mentor of mine, as he’s reminding his beloved congregation that the gospel of Jesus is always about love. “What if Jesus comes to this world,” I hear Joe ask, “and calls you and me in order to invite us to plant these seeds of love, our very lives, wherever – wherever! – we are sent?” He begins to name where and to whom we are spread and sent – to homes and workplaces and communities and people all across the city, to women and men, boys and girls whose hurts and heartaches he’ll never know, but *you’ll* know them, he says. “It’s for your life to be planted there, not mine.”

From the addicts to the refugees, from highest royalty to that unlikeable person in your office, we are called to plant our lives in love everywhere we are sent, I hear Joe say. The smile in his voice was clear as he continued: “And yes even to the congregation of the First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem who are trying to steal our Emily Hull McGee.” My potato peeler clattered to the floor as the shock of recognition tore through me. For friends, it was this weekend three years ago when I met you, when I stood in this pulpit, so very pregnant – with Annabelle, of course, but pregnant with the possibility of what might unfold for us together if you called me to be

your next pastor. It was this very hour where we shared inspiration together from the words of Kentucky poet Wendell Berry, who says: “friends, every day do something that won’t compute. Love the Lord. Love the world... Love someone who does not deserve it... Ask the questions that have no answers. Invest in the millennium. *Plant sequoias*. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest... Practice resurrection.”<sup>2</sup> It was this moment where together we caught the vision of what might emerge if we rolled up our sleeves and plunged our hands into the damp, dark soil of our church’s life, to bury tiny seeds of love and spend the next season of our life together cultivating the sequoias that emerge in whose shade we may never rest... because “it is precisely for this reason that we have come to this hour.”

And so I wonder — what is the hour to which you have come? What decision stands before you that demands a level of surrender you instinctively know you must yield but you’re just not sure if you can give? What grains of your life as you know it and love it must die, lest in adoring your life and all its trappings — your money, your schedule, your relationships, your appearance, your plan — you lose it?<sup>3</sup> What purposeful turning towards Jesus nudges you to some form of death in order that you might gain life? What crosses must you take up and bear into the systems of this world, systems of racism and sexism, consumerism and individualism,

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” <https://cals.arizona.edu/~steidl/Liberation.html>

<sup>3</sup> Margaret A. Farley’s commentary (“John 12:20-33, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p142) provoked some meaningful questions in my preparation this week.

systems holding us captive to that which we don't even realize is taking our very lives?

Brothers and sisters, *what is the hour to which you have come, and where is Jesus beckoning you to go?* Perhaps for you that hour is the decision that has nagged at your heart for years, a decision to commit your life fully to follow in the way of Jesus. Or maybe for you the hour has come to finally face your addiction and put down the bottle, the mirror, the phone, the pace of your living, whatever for you becomes the thing or the habit you quickly reach for to fill whatever hole or wound you have, so *that instead* you can follow Jesus in his way of abundant life. For you, perhaps the hour has come to lay aside your fear of knowing the outcast, the lowly, the marginalized, the different, so *that instead* you can follow Jesus in his way of love. Or maybe for you the hour has come to speak where you too long have been silent or to listen where you too long have been loud, to march when you too long have been motionless or to rest when you too long have been roused, so *that instead* you can follow Jesus in his way of courage.

No matter the hour, the invitation is clear. Jesus says, "whoever serves me must *follow* me." That means following Jesus in the way of abundant life, the way of love, the way of courage, the way of God. Following Jesus doesn't mean making a one-time decision, forming all your opinions and perspectives, and then staying still, holding fast, hunkering down, and defending the cause. No! Following Jesus demands movement, actively journeying from where you've been to where you'll go. Following Jesus expects that you will change and grow, that the seeds of the gospel planted deeply within you will germinate and break through the hard winter's

ground, that they will stretch towards the sun and bend with curiosity to the world around, that they will flower and bear fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Following Jesus urges you to be willing to leave behind the world and the worldview you've so carefully cultivated to 'come and see' what life might look like on the other side.

Like the heavenly thunder that filled the sky there with Jesus and the crowds that surrounded him, Joe's sermon from March 22, 2015 that I hadn't heard until just this week has echoed around in my mind. I heard him say, "Love is hard. We grieve [in the change]. But what are we to say, "father, save us from this hour? No, it's for this reason that Highland has come to this hour. To send Emily forth to be an ambassador for God's liberating love, even if it hurts us."<sup>4</sup> And I feel both the possibility and the responsibility of this hour of our life together. I have found myself wondering what a renewed following of Jesus should look like for me and for us, what shape must this very season and hour take for our beloved community, where I've been unconsciously trying to save our life together as we've known it but instead should be losing it for the sake of the gospel and the kingdom work to which we are called.

I would be lying if I told you that over these past three years, I hadn't prayed from time to time, "Father, save me from this hour!" (I won't tell you which committee meetings prompted said prayers though!) But I say now to you what I said to you then: "friends, there will be days that we grow weary from the task of ministry. There will be days that we're not sure if we have

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Phelps, "The Look of Love: Love Plants," a sermon preached at Highland Baptist Church, March 22, 2015, <http://www.buzzsprout.com/6362/257022-the-look-of-love-love-plants-by-joe-phelps>

the capacity to change or the courage to lead. There will be days [when] we'll have arduous meetings about important topics and wonder what in the world we're supposed to do with our buildings or our committees or our leadership or our budget. There will be days when the hard task of listening to God to discern a vision for our future ahead is just too great a weight to bear. There will be days when we just want ... those sequoias we've planted to start producing fruit and giving us shade in which to rest.”<sup>5</sup>

But I trust and I know that the God who called Jesus into sacrificial love is the same God who equips us to face the hours of our life. The God who reveals love stronger than death in Jesus is the same God who plants seeds of joy in us that stir even in the darkest winters. The God who thunders forth in crowds surrounding Jesus that God might be glorified is the same God who opens our ears and our eyes in circumstances, through friends, in situations, and even for a preacher in someone else's sermon. The God in Jesus whose hour became the holiest of his life is the same God who promises to be with us, bearing and bringing life in the hour that faces you and me and even our church. That is the God whose face we see fully in Jesus if only we're willing to give up what is so that we can look intently in wonder at the hope of what could be.

Amen!

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<sup>5</sup> As shared in the sermon “Planting Sequoias” delivered in the weekend of my call to pastor First Baptist Church on Fifth, March 22, 2015.