

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A hundred and fifty years after the Civil War, both experts and amateurs are still dissecting and discussing the battles of that great conflict. Some of the talk centers on General George McClellan, who was given charge of the Army of the Potomac and perhaps even considered himself the savior of the Union.

As it turned out, McClellan proved to be great at logistics, organizing armies, transporting them across hundreds of miles, keeping them fed and supplied – but not actually leading them into battle.

The soldiers adored McClellan, and he loved their adoration, but his critics say he never actually did the things for which he was commissioned.

As a result, President Lincoln eventually fired him. Though McClellan has many defenders to this day, there are far more who, in evaluating his story, think he withdrew from doing the thing he was supposed to do, congratulating himself all the while.

By contrast, Jesus, despite his human fear expressed in the Garden of Gethsemane and here in today's gospel reading, had no intention of stepping aside from the onrushing events that would lead to his death but also to his Father's glory.

In all the gospels there comes a point where Jesus, knowing the fate that awaits him, nevertheless sets his face toward Jerusalem and will not be deterred. And here, in the Gospel of John, Jesus recognizes the arrival of the Greek-speaking converts as the sign that the time for the glorification of God through the cross has drawn near.

This is where his mission and ministry have been heading all along. The die is cast. And Jesus states very clearly that he will not step aside, though he has free will and freedom of action, from all that awaits him.

A little context: Just prior to this passage, Jesus demonstrated his power over life and death in the raising of Lazarus. Stung to the heart by his friend's passing, he came to understand its effect on his circle of friends, leading him to weep openly.

John tells us that following Jesus' raising of Lazarus, the religious and political leaders met to express their determination to kill Jesus because of the great uproar the raising caused.

This led the high priest, Caiaphas, to insist, “You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50).

So throughout Jerusalem there was excitement as people wondered, “What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?” (John 11:56).

But following his anointing at the hand of his friend Mary, an act Jesus interpreted as preparation for his own burial, Jesus entered the city to great acclamation.

Back to our passage: Certain individuals identified as “Greeks” approach Phillip, saying “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Some suggest these are Jewish believers from elsewhere in the Roman Empire, where Greek was their first language.

But others say, more likely, “Greeks” is John’s term for those Gentiles identified elsewhere in the New Testament as “God-fearers,” those who were attracted to the belief in one God, but who were not fully included among the Jews.

They were outsiders who could enter the outer courts of the great temple in Jerusalem but were prevented from entering the inner courts where the sacrifices took place.

In 1871, an archeologist discovered an inscription from the second temple that stated that no foreigner was allowed past the temple plaza, and that whoever was caught would only have himself to blame for his death, which would soon follow.

Jesus interpreted the arrival of outsiders, those beyond the circle of faith who desired to draw nearer, as the sign that his death was at hand.

He shared a short parable about a single grain dying when it is planted and giving life to many when it bears much fruit, making it clear that clinging to life would ensure its loss, while those who gave their all would receive eternal life.

Still, this was no easy course of action. Jesus admitted to himself, “Now my soul is troubled.” But this was the very reason he had come into the world. This death, Jesus said, would also glorify God.

And if that were not enough, the sign was confirmed by a voice from heaven that some interpreted as an angel’s voice and some as simply thunder.

Earlier, when Nicodemus had visited him in the night, Jesus had pointed to the story from Numbers when, as the people died from snake bites, God ordered Moses to fashion an image of a snake and lift it on high. All who saw the image were saved (John 3:14-15).

Jesus, therefore, both early in his ministry and at this late stage drew upon that story, comparing the healing that came from a sign lifted on high to the salvation that would come when he himself was lifted on high on the cross, when he would “draw all people to [him]self.”

This is also a sign to us.

When we are willing to give up our all, stepping out of our comfort zone, welcoming others through our worship instead of insisting that only our favorite hymns and our favorite forms of worship be used, we welcome those who were once outsiders and now wish to be a part of God's family.

The message of Jesus is for everyone, not just a limited circle of well-heeled friends. At some point, our own ministries with each other, as important and fulfilling as they may be, must be reexamined so that our ministry to those outside our tight circle of friends takes precedence. That's part of what it means to say that the hour of glorification has come.

That paradox – of saving one's life by losing one's life, of losing one's life by trying too hard to save one's life – is not only about living and dying, but about giving way, giving precedence to others, putting the needs of others first. That's how the seed bears much fruit.

We wish to lift up Jesus so that all the world may be drawn to the fellowship of God's people. But who will speak to us, and how will they speak to us? One has to wonder if the outsiders in today's gospel passage approached Philip because he had a Greek name and was someone who spoke Greek.

Are we ready to speak the language of our community, or would we rather speak with church terminology that no one understands (perhaps not even us)?

These Greek-speaking, God-fearing Gentiles were outsiders in the outer courts. Sometimes churches have barriers that prevent the people Jesus has sent to us from really entering into the inner courts.

These are not physical barriers, but when congregations are unwilling to share leadership with those who may not have the correct last name or whose roots in the church don't go back three or four generations or who are not made to feel truly welcome, then we might as well have a warning sign when people enter church buildings, reading "You are not welcome here."

There may not be a sign like the one at the temple warning of a swift death to trespassers, but we may have subtle signs that tell people they can go so far and no farther. Let us ask ourselves honestly if there are barriers preventing believers from participating even more in our shared ministry to the world.

It's important that we welcome outsiders, for the hour has come for us, as the church of Jesus Christ, to be raised up high so that all the world may see and God may be glorified. Jesus was raised on high to the view of the whole world on the cross. For us to be raised on high as believers, we must be prepared to sacrifice having things our way all the time, hearing only the hymns we like best all the time, having safe sermons that don't challenge us beyond our comfort zone, always serving the kind of meals with which we've grown up.

I began by referring to Civil War General George McClellan, whose critics say he was pleased with himself and his army, but never actually used the army for what it was intended to do. Are we willing to use the church of Jesus Christ for what it was intended to do? Or is it for our own glorification, not God's?

Are we going to congratulate ourselves for being a friendly church without actually having any friends? Jesus said that with his crucifixion, "the ruler of this world will be driven out." That's what the arrival of outsiders meant to him.

Jesus concluded by saying, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you" (John 12:35).

The light of Jesus is with us now. Let us take hold of the hour that is given to us and lift high the cross, that all may be drawn to the Savior, and to glory. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

Alan Goertemiller, Pastor
Pilgrim Lutheran Church of Indianapolis, Inc.

3 "Temple Warning Inscription," Wikipedia,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_Warning_inscription.