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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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To See, Serve, and Follow...
John 12:20-33

Some things you have to see to believe. One of those for me is the Mariposa Grove at Yosemite National Park. The grove is filled with several hundred giant sequoias that have been growing since before Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan, ...since Moses was a deputy sheriff, as Shannon Webster liked to say. With names like the Columbia Tree and Grizzly Giant, these trees stand over 250 feet high and bear the scars of time like stately grandfathers. I had read about giant sequoias in books, but nothing compares to standing next to one and putting your hand on its massive trunk. I had to see it to believe how massive and awe-inspiring they really are.

Since Yosemite is a popular place, the forest sees heavy foot traffic and is more curated than other groves of redwoods you may see. It was surprising to me when I was there how little undergrowth there was – the result of controlled burns the forest rangers set periodically to protect the trees. Fires are part of the growth cycle of any forest – the sequoia trees have thick bark that can withstand low-intensity flames, and their cones open to release their seeds when exposed to extreme heat. The fire burns away the undergrowth, weeding out competition for sunlight, water, and nutrients. Ash fertilizes the ground, making a perfect spot for seeds to land and germinate. It's no wonder the trees are able to survive over countless centuries. The grove is a sight to behold.

In our text this morning, some Greeks ask to see Jesus. They ask Philip, who asks Andrew, then together they go to find Jesus. The gospel of John is overflowing with rich symbolism to show that Jesus is the real presence of God among the people. Most everything points to something else. So commentators say that by having Greeks come ask to see Jesus, John shows the future growth of the early church beyond the Jewish community. Christ's statement at the end of the passage – that when he is lifted up (ascends after the resurrection) he will draw all people to himself – foreshadows the growth of Christendom also.

This is the last time Jesus teaches publicly in the gospel of John before he is executed. In these verses, he's explaining what's about to

happen to him. It's not clear if the Greeks ever do see Christ face to face. They've heard he raised Lazarus from the dead, so they want to see him and see if they can believe him capable of such a feat. But they may not have seen him - The text makes it seem like Christ was teaching just to Philip and Andrew. The next time the Greeks might have a chance to see Jesus, it would be under very different circumstances – he's not in public again in this gospel until his crucifixion. If that's all they see, I wonder what they'd believe about him.

While they may never get to see Jesus, but they certainly see Philip and Andrew, and this is significant. Philip and Andrew are among the first disciples Jesus calls – Jesus invites them to “come and see.” Now, nearing the end of Christ's life, others are asking if Philip and Andrew will help them *see Jesus*. I think John is not just foreshadowing that the church will grow. I think he's telling us *how* the gospel will spread: disciples will help others *see Jesus*. How? By being like him. by following him. By serving and loving others as he did. By being like Christ, Philip and Andrew helped the Greeks -- outsiders, newcomers-- see Jesus. And so can we. With our acts of love and service, we help others *see Jesus*.

Another powerful image in this passage is Jesus as a grain of wheat that must die to bear fruit. Seeds multiply. I got a handful of cosmo seeds from my dad a few years ago, and a packet of others from a friend in Atlanta. Sowed in my garden, they quickly sprang up into a thicket of blooms, each bearing a spiky fistful of seeds by late summer. Maddie and I made a ritual of the harvest, gathering them each afternoon when we got home. One packet became many – we have enough to turn our backyard into a field of wildflowers this summer: one seed planted has tremendous power to multiply.

Jesus was just one person. But he built a movement – a movement that will spread like wildfire following his death and resurrection. A movement of people who have seen and believe in the power of love to overcome the powers of sin and death. A movement of people who seek to follow him by serving and loving others; people who believe in the power of God to save and bring new life. A movement of people working to transform the world.

But looking around here some weeks... there's not a lot of movement. The church today is solidly an institution. Institutions are like giant sequoias

– slow to change, steady, set in their ways. Predictable. Hierarchical. Static.

Movements are dynamic, adaptable. They're driven by vision and passion for a common goal. They're relational, communally led. In many ways, I think we are already more like a movement than a lot of our peers. While there are plenty of benefits of being an institution, I wonder what would it look like if we were even more like a movement? Would it make it easier to help others see Jesus? Would we be planting even more seeds of love and hope in the world?

I want us to try an experiment to see if we can embrace a little Christian movement in the midst of our institution. In a minute, I want you to find 2-3 other people – not necessarily someone who came to church with you today.

Movements grow through 1-1 relationship building, so first I want you to take a minute to introduce yourselves to each other.

Share one or more of your responses to these questions: What is giving you hope? What could you do or are you doing that is planting a seed of hope or love in the world? OR Where have you seen Jesus? Can you think of a time when you may have helped others see Jesus?

Take a minute to think about these questions and then find your 2-3 people. You don't have a lot of time for this conversation – maybe 8 minutes.

When you're ready, please have a rep from your conversation bring your prayer cloths forward to weave into our loom. You can either make an offering of the cloths on the table, or stay and take a minute to weave them into the loom. It's fine to continue weaving through the hymn – it's a simple one. Or, wait and come back during the last hymn, which is also a simple Taize chant.

My prayer is that we leave here more strongly connected to one another, with eyes wide open to see Jesus in one another, with hearts and hands wide open to show Jesus to the world. Confident that we are part of a larger movement, planting seeds of peace and hope that will surely blossom and multiply far beyond what we might ever dream or even imagine.