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Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta
Renewal of Clergy Vows/John 12: 20-36
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From the Gospel lesson, we hear the Greeks say to Jesus' disciples, "We wish to see Jesus." (John 12:21) We wish to see Jesus.

I've always been struck by those five words. How about you? Struck how such a concise request says so much and speaks to our internal longing and God's proximity. Struck at how those words imply the privilege of what it means to be baptized. Struck because the words come to the disciples' ears from the lips of the world.

Those five words affirm what I have experienced in ministry. That even though the word *religion* has a dubious distinction for many, and though the word *church* is negatively charged and is popularly being compared to an antiquated Oldsmobile, the world still wants to see Jesus. I hope today you deeply know that. I hope you know that the world wants to see God: real, able, good and generous. A God that is close and patient. The world wants to see Jesus because the world wants to see the embodiment of its haunting hunch: that darkness will indeed give way to light. That arrogance will be swallowed up by humility. That grace is God's only sermon. That kindness knows no shame. That love is nondepletable and an energy source that leaves an indelible mark. Though we, the church, may stumble and veer off message from time to time, the world still insists on wanting to see Jesus.

In this meeting of the world between Jesus and the disciples, which Luke records, there is a lesson for each one of us. Jesus has come to clarity about His purpose. He's more sure than ever before He wants to trade His life for an increase in God's esteem and celebrity. A lived faith in Jesus becomes witness communicated in authenticity. So, He does what we are to do; He gives himself away. And, from his life experience of uncoerced self-giving, He invites all of us to follow: the church and the world into something I like to call "The Great Exchange."

Did these Greeks know what they were asking for when they requested to see Jesus? Did we know what we were asking when we asked to see Jesus through service to His church?

To see Jesus is to see "a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying, but on dying, yet bearing much fruit." To see Jesus is to see opportunity: an opportunity to forfeit life as defined by the inferior authors of the age, and gain life as defined by The Author and Pioneer of life forever replenishing.

There can be no real seeing of Jesus, and therefore no commending of a real Jesus, without embarking on great exchanges: Like me for Him. Mine for ours. Current repertoire for heart's desire. Control for freedom. Fear for love. Great fruit, great power, great joy come through us when we more fully embody St. John's words, "I must decrease and He must increase." John 3:30

Losing self to gain Christ is God's growth strategy. That's what the Holy Spirit is working out in us, day after day. Not intellectual assent to spiritual propositions but visceral decent into "knowledge of the Son of God," so that "we become mature, are growing up in the stature and fullness of Christ." Eph. 4:13

II.

The increasing glory of God through the growth of our souls for the welfare of the church and the reconciling of the world – that's the whole point. But, we know growth hurts. And still, muscles must tear some to double in strength.

In this Jesus is our faithful brother, even with His unique divine consciousness, His catalog of signs and wonders and His mountaintop experiences. Jesus knew the pain of the great exchange. So, Jesus walks beside us in our great exchanges. How can we really know this? We know this because of his confession. Jesus says out loud what we say in our hearts as we live and serve and lead: "...my soul is troubled."

And Jesus wonders out loud if His prayer should be, "Father, save me from this hour?" To see Jesus is to see the real cost of discipleship: the loneliness and the life abundant. Truth in advertising. He knows what we know. To give yourself deeply, even to a trustworthy God, will leave you troubled and crying at times.

But whether our trouble be like Paul's thorn or Peter's cowardice, Judas' deceit or Mary's loss, there is a promise that enables and ennobles our exchanges. It is the renewing confirmation that Isaiah spoke, "Before we were born, the Lord called us and named us. We are chosen for this service." Isaiah 49:1-7

But, better than that, it is precisely because of the thorns, the failings and even the devil that you and I can know -- do know! -- that we are increasing in the knowledge that God's grace is sufficient! That God is worth our great exchanges. That God is not slack concerning God's promises. The world is still leaning in to hear this word, not from our lips as much as our lives.

Show us Jesus. This is the heart of our ministry. And, like Paul said, "By God's mercy, we have this ministry, so we do not lose heart." 2 Cor. 4:1 Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit

welling up inside of us can take our soul's sad question marks and straighten them into resolute exclamation points.

That is my desired outcome for our time together. That through me, right now, you would hear God say to your heart: I see your sacrifice. I see your trying. Thank you. I knew I was right when I called you.

Now “press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call.” Phil. 3:14 My prayer is that out of our tearful, fearful, exasperated and still hopeful souls that we would find the faith to make our next series of great exchanges, individually and as a diocese.

III.

“And what should I pray, Father save me from this hour?” “No,” Jesus said, “it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” John 20:27 It is truly a gift of the Holy Spirit to know what this hour requires of us. God has planted all of us here. Now. This is not arbitrary. We are the ones we’re waiting for. On the long hallway of time, God knew exactly where God wanted us. This is God’s hour through Christ, through us. We have been flattered to be called at this defining time in the life of Christ, in the life of the church and the world. So then, what are you ready to lose, in this hour, “to gain the knowledge of the surpassing value of Christ?” Philippians 3:8

Institutions do not normally rise above the emotional maturity of their leaders. This also is true for spiritual maturity as well. The “more excellent way” (1Cor. 12:31) forward for us – the church and for the world – is to exchange the despairing passivity that chokes our best faith for new competencies: adoration, playfulness, oblation, innovation, kind candor, collaboration, bold communication and single-minded devotion to Jesus Christ for the purpose of transformation. This is our work now!

And when we make our next great exchange, when we present “ourselves, our souls and bodies...” as a “living sacrifice... which is our reasonable service” BCP 366 Romans 12, we will hear what Jesus heard. We will hear heaven whisper, “God be glorified and glorified and glorified again.” We will hear Jesus say, “If you will lift me up [from the inside first], I will draw all kinds to myself.” John 12:32 And the crowd around us, the church and the world, will say of us – this man, this woman – has showed me something of Jesus: the loss and the life. The sacrifice and the saving grace. The toil and the transformation.

As we prove with our flesh that the church is a learning organization of laypersons, deacons, priests and bishops and not a mausoleum, it will be like the thunder and the lightning that Luke recalled. Like new warm air colliding with cold stagnant air, that

announces that forces are at work and creating light despite the blackest clouds. And yes, producing energy – dangerous for the status quo.

The Greeks came to Jesus to see something different, something that the world could not show them. And they saw in the disciples some of that Jesus difference they longed to know. For God's sake, give yourself to this work again today. For God's sake, let Christ have more of you today. For God's sake, be encouraged and "be confident, that the One who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Phil. 1.6

*"And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us;
We will not fear, for God has willed His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure;
one little Word shall fell him.*

We are the bearers of that Word.