

(This sermon was inspired by Jeff Nelson, an associate minister at the Birmingham First United Methodist Church near Detroit. I was privileged to hear him speak and was moved not only by his authentic manner, but by his gifts of thought and language.)

Read John 12:12-26

Fourteen years ago this month, the state of Indiana dedicated a museum to Ernie Pyle, the World War II correspondent. The dedication took place on the fiftieth anniversary of Pyle's death. He was killed by Japanese gunfire on the island of Ie Shima on April 18, 1945. When I was a child, I read several collections of Ernie Pyle's work, learned he'd grown up in Dana, Indiana, just down Highway 36, and was intrigued by his life and work. The morning of the dedication, April 18th, 1995, I called my dad and asked if he wanted to go with me to the dedication, which he agreed to do. A number of people who had known Ernie Pyle were going to be there, including the *60 Minutes* commentator, Andy Rooney, who'd worked with Pyle on *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper. I was just starting to write essays and was hoping to meet Andy Rooney, who in addition to his television work is also a noted essayist.

When my father and I arrived, the town was packed full of people. We couldn't get anywhere near the museum, so went instead to the far end of town where we entered a small antique store on the main street. I was discouraged, because I'd really wanted to meet Rooney and was starting to realize I wouldn't get anywhere near him. There were only a few people in the museum, late-comers like me who hadn't been smart enough to arrive early to get a seat.

So I was in the antique store poking around, looking at World War II memorabilia, and I heard someone next to me mutter something. I thought he was talking to me, so I turned to speak to whoever it was, and it was Andy Rooney. He apparently didn't like crowds, so had fled to the antique store. We talked for several minutes. I'd had in my mind questions I wanted to ask him about writing, but we talked about woodworking instead. At least, I think that's what we discussed. I was so nervous, I can't remember much of our conversation. I do remember he talked a bit about sharing a tent with Ernie Pyle. In retrospect, I think he was testing his speech on me.

But it was an honor to meet him. Not only because I enjoy his commentary, but because he is well-known and I had never met anyone famous before.

So here is Jesus. He has entered Jerusalem. The crowds are huge, people are lined up to meet him, to cheer him on. He is the man of the hour. There are a few Greeks at the back of the crowd, probably in an antique store, they got there late and couldn't get anywhere near Jesus. Then they met Philip, a disciple of Jesus, one of the twelve. Of course, the fun of knowing someone famous is telling others you know someone famous. Philip put word out that he knew Jesus. The Greeks can't believe their good luck. "Can you introduce us? We'd like to meet him."

Philip is stuck. He's been bragging about his close, personal friendship with Jesus, so he has to take them. Now you would think Jesus would be in an up mood, given the day he's had. I mean he's had a really good day. The grand marshal of the biggest parade in the capital city. That's a pretty good gig. So Philip takes the Greeks, and tracks Jesus down, makes his way past security, flashes his ID card. He approaches Jesus and says, "These are some friends of mine. They wanted to meet you.". And Jesus starts talking about dying and losing your life to save it. Talk about a downer. Boy, Jesus, you don't talk about that. Get a grip. Take a Prozac. Relax. Stop being paranoid. I mean, it's not like someone is out to get you.

But Jesus knows. I don't know how he knows. But haven't you ever felt the fleeting nature of admiration. I was talking last week with our teenage neighbor. He has a girlfriend. She's a cute kid, but he's her 315th boyfriend this year alone. All his friends are excited for him, because she's so pretty, but he knows, he knows, it isn't going to last. He's just bracing himself.

Maybe that's how Jesus feels. The crowd loves him now, but it's a fickle crowd. And to keep them he's going to have to do bigger miracles, heal even more people, ramp everything up a notch. Or worse, maybe he realized how close faith and fanaticism sometimes walk, and he's starting get a little anxious.

The belief that eventually developed within Christianity—that God created Jesus so he could die for our sins, that Jesus was born knowing he would be crucified, and began marching headlong toward that from the very start...well, I'm not so sure about that. Those first Christians were so accustomed to a culture of sacrifice and blood atonement, that was the only lens through which they saw God. What I think is that Jesus was a student of history, knew what happened to prophets, knew how people wanted more and more from them, knew how quickly passions could turn, knew how those cheering crowds could become jeering mobs.

So he's wary and watchful. He sees where things are headed, but maybe he's still a little hopeful that history won't repeat itself, that maybe religion and politics will bring out the best in people, not the worst. He hopes that might be the case, but he's not sure, so he's just waiting to see how things will turn out, waiting to see what direction the crowd will go. His disciples are up, they're exhilarated. So he brings them down to earth. For the plant to grow, the seed has to die. Don't forget that. He's getting them ready. They can't see Golgotha, can't see the cross, from where they are, but he suspects it might be just over the hill. It's like the ocean. You can sense it before you can see it. So maybe he senses something, and he's just waiting to see.

In a way, we might say he's still waiting. Waiting to see how we handle things, waiting to see whether we'll do the right thing, whether we will be motivated by decency or anger, waiting to see whether we'll heed our better angels or worst demons.

We were in Detroit this week. I was speaking at a church there. Took Joan and Sam along. Spencer was enduring spring break in Florida with our neighbors. We were in Detroit. You talk about a hard hit city. The population has dropped in half because of lost jobs. Empty, falling down houses and stores.

Nearly everyone in this church has a job connected to the car industry, so everyone is hurting, everyone is struggling. We stayed at a doctor's house. I said to his wife, "It's a good thing he's a doctor. He'll always have a job."

She said, "Not when his patients have lost their health insurance. Right now, he's seeing a lot of people for free. But we'll make it."

There was no bitterness there. Just matter-of-fact.

So the church got creative. Held the state's largest rummage sale, raised \$60,000.00, and poured it back in their community. Does that twice a year. I was there three days and not once did I hear a word of self-pity. Not once. Over and over again, I encountered cheerfulness, confidence, hope, kindness, and incredible generosity.

You know, friends, I have become cynical about organized religion this past year, even to the point of wondering if I could remain in it. Maybe you've felt that way too, at some point. But then I meet people like that, and I think of how caring you all are. It's almost as if we come to this fork in the road, these hard places, when we could go either way. We have to decide whether we're going to get mean and nasty and small-minded, or gracious and kind and visionary. And Jesus is just waiting to see which road we'll take, whether hard times will reduce us to our worst or raise us to our best. What will it do to you?