***Greek Salad* (A Palm Sunday Sermon)**

Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, April 14, 2019

John 12:12-19

Rev. John Suk, PhD

Once upon a time a lion, a scarecrow and a tin man found themselves sitting at a bar.

Unfortunately, as they were sitting there, drinking virgin Margarita Mocktails, a fight broke out at the billiards table between a flying monkey and an evil witch. The monkey threw her drink at the witch, and the witch swung her cue stick at the monkey, and soon furniture was flying and patrons were headed for the exits.

Meanwhile, the bartender fell into a panic. “Oh no, oh no,” he said. “I can’t afford all this damage. I shall go bankrupt if the fight isn’t stopped.” And so, the bartender turned to the lion, the scarecrow, and the tin man who, you will remember, were all sitting at his bar, and he begged them, “Help! Help me!”

“I will help,” cried the lion. “I will help and the tin man and his ax can help too! But,” the lion continued, “I don’t want any help from the strawman. All strawmen are too stupid to help.”

“I will help,” cried the tin man, even before the lion was done. “I will help and I think the strawman, who is very scary and terrifying to all winged creatures, can help too! But,” said the tin man, “I don’t want help from the lion. All lions are scaredy-cats.”

Finally, even before the lion and the tin man were done talking, the strawman added, “I will help! And I think the lion can help too, because the lion has deadly claws. But,” said the strawman, “I don’t want any help from the tin man, because all tin men are stuck up.”

Well, thought the bartender, this is no help at all. The lion hates all strawmen, and the tin man hates all lions, and the strawman can’t abide tin men, so the three together are only going to start another fight. And that’s what they did and that is why the bar was completely destroyed and the bartender went bankrupt.

You see, while we humans love at least some select members of our families and even a few friends, we have a wicked tendency to hate the other—however we define the other, whether they be lions, tin men, or scarecrows.

We all wrestle with deep-seated prejudices against those that we count as “the other.” They might be, as in today’s scripture, the foreign Greeks who wanted to see Jesus. Or the other might be Jews or commies, immigrants or welfare mothers, inconvenient Indians or one-percenters, oil company execs or dropouts, young black men or people who wear “Make America Great Again,” hats. We all wrestle with deep-seated prejudices based on race or ethnicity or appetites or jealousy or pride or whatever.

We blame the other. We resent the other. We go to war with the other. We scapegoat the other. We avoid the other. We blame the other. We get into cat fights and bar fights and offer cold shoulders to the other.

Jesus understood this. That is why, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus didn’t merely say “love your neighbour.” Jesus added, “love your enemies.”

Now, there is an interesting little twist that happens in our scripture reading that underlines this concern Jesus had for “the other,” or—as the writer of John identifies them here—the Greeks. You see, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, several times, “My hour has not come.” So, when his mother asks Jesus to turn water into wine, Jesus at first refuses, saying, “My hour has not yet come.” In chapter seven, Jesus chooses not to do miracles in Jerusalem because his hour had not yet come. And in chapter eight, no one arrests Jesus in the temple, because his hour has not yet come. In a way, you could say that the whole Gospel of John turns on the mystery of when Jesus’ hour will come.

And, it’s here, in our passage, that the hour finally arrives and the mystery is resolved. Here’s how. Some Greek-speaking gentiles approach Jesus’ disciples in hoping to score an interview with Jesus. How odd. Greek gentiles and Jews were “other” to each other. They had to live together, in Palestine, but neither was happy about it.

Jews thought Greeks were unclean—religiously, culturally, and in every other way you could imagine. I mean, Greeks exercised naked in the shadow of the temple at a gymnasium that they had built! Jews saw Greeks and other gentiles as the occupying enemy.

Greeks, in turn, thought Jews were backward and atheistic—or nearly so, since Jews only worshipped one God, rather than the many gods that was usual for educated Greeks. Greeks thought Jews were uptight, legalistic troublemakers who wouldn’t know a good empire if they tripped over it.

But Jesus changed all that, somehow, when his hour arrived. Jesus, in the words of the Apostle Paul, tore down the dividing wall of hostility between them. Here, after the Triumphal Entry, some Greeks actually want to put their hands in the hand of the man from Galilee. They want to take Jesus’ yoke upon themselves, and learn from Jesus, because he was meek and humble in a way that no one else was. These Greeks had heard the Sermon on the Mount, and decided, “this changes everything.”

And, when his hour comes, Jesus does change everything. In Jesus there is no male or female, Greek or Jew, slave or free—no “other.” Of his impending death, Jesus says just a paragraph after today’s passage, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus’ hour, Jesus’ passion was to save us from the prejudices and hatreds we direct at each other. Jesus’ life was meant to save us from the lovelessness and fear of other that destroys community.

And here, in this mid-sized Toronto church, we get to live that passion of Jesus’ ourselves, with each other and the other. We get to experiment with love. We get to try out what it would be like to embrace Greeks and play nice with all.

And that’s good. Because here in Toronto we are a multi-cultural society that needs to watch out for each other—that needs to love each other—if we’re going to be a thriving society. We are a city and country with deep divisions between rich and poor, black and white, first nation and the rest of us, gay and straight, privileged or not—we are a country with deep divisions between our tin men and strawmen that need to be addressed and healed if Canada is going to be a safe and prosperous place in the future. And doing so just happens to be what Jesus was all about. It was Jesus’ glory.

The hour has come. Embrace your inner and outer Greek. Embrace the other.

Now, I get that Jesus’ prescription, here, in John 12, is short on specifics. I get that when it comes to Toronto or Canada, Jesus only offers an ideal, rather than a detailed roadmap. Jesus is addressing the personal here, and not the systemic issues that are a product of personal prejudice aligning itself with power—especially the power of institutions. So, Jesus doesn’t grab us by our noses and pull us in the exact policy direction we should go. No, by offering us an ideal, Jesus inspires us as adults with minds of our own to do the right thing, in the end, both personally and as people with influence in our society’s institutions.

Still, Jesus’ attack on prejudice is a great place for us to start. Jesus’ ideal is one that can draw tin men and straw men and lions together to solve our city’s and nation’s problems. Now. *This hour*. Before it is too late.