

-C.S. Lewis is arguably of the most celebrated Christian storytellers of the 20th century. His stories are richly interwoven with symbolism and purpose. How many of you have read a book or story by C.S. Lewis? (raise hands) Of course his most famous story: *The Lion, Witch, and Wardrobe* is read by children and adults worldwide. One of my favorite C.S. Lewis stories, however, is a lesser known book titled *The Great Divorce*. It's a very little book and quick read which centers on Lewis' imagination of Heaven and Hell. The whole story revolves around the narrator (we don't find out his name at all) finding himself in this damp, dark, city or what he calls the "grey town." (this is what the author seems to indicate as Hell). It rains constantly and when it doesn't rain, it's always cold and grey. There is a bus that leaves from the bus stop in the middle of town once every day. The narrator finally decides: "I want to go on some excursion", so joins a few people in boarding the bus. While on the bus, the narrator finds out he is going to Heaven and he starts getting really excited. "Alright!" he says. "This is quite exciting. The moment of entering Heaven has come!" Everyone on the bus starts getting super excited as the bus flies (yup, this is a flying bus) through the air. It finally lands in this beautiful field with foothills and mountains in the distance. It's the most beautiful place the narrator has ever seen. "Final stop!" the bus driver yells. "This is the moment!", the narrator thinks as he starts to get off the bus. As he gets off, he suddenly realizes he's barefoot and the beautiful grass underneath him is really hard.....hard and jagged as walking on rocks. Infact, as he is walking around this scene, it becomes incredibly painful to walk around. Sure enough, there are people that come down from the mountains to meet the newly arrived bus and greet the visitors. Turns out, these are people that all of the visitors knew sometime in their life. They are there to encourage this busload of visitors to walk with them up to the mountains. Some people scoff at the help and become so painfilled that they say: "I'm done!" and get back on the waiting bus bound for the city. "This is not what I signed up for," the narrator thinks to himself.

-I won't give away the entire story and invite you to read it, perhaps we can even do a book study on it this summer as it's such a great and quick read. But, I have had this story in my mind while wrestling with this, yet again, somewhat obscure gospel reading for today from the John (we've been getting a few of them lately).

-We have these Greeks coming to Philip, who then goes to Andrew, who then goes to Jesus (sounds like a church committee or something right?). We don't know if they actually see Jesus, but Jesus goes into this longer explanation of "the hour" "The hour has come."

-To give you some context on where we are in the Gospel of John, we are doing some things a little bit backwards. This story is immediately following Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey for Palm Sunday. Mary has just anointed his feet for burial and Jesus raised up Lazarus from the dead the chapter before where the Jewish leadership quietly makes the big decision that they have to get rid of him. All throughout the Gospel

of John, Jesus tells his disciples and others again and again: the hour has not yet come. It's like his tagline almost in John: Hello, I'm Jesus. Remember, the hour has not come yet. But now in this story, that has changed. The moment has arrived, the hour HAS come! So.....what's changed? What's different? What on earth does Jesus mean? -What if "the hour" was referring to a mindset rather than a moment? You know, Jesus is becoming one popular guy and all the gospel stories explain this in different ways. Crowds continue to build across the countryside and throughout even Jerusalem. A clue that this is happening in John is at the beginning of our story: even the very class structure minded, high level, Greek citizens are getting curious and turning out to see Jesus. I have to believe that Jesus found this kinda fun. It's a real kick preaching to the crowds of people. It's pretty awesome to have fans, applause, and warm feedback. Jesus was getting to be a little bit of star. Yet, we all know that's not what he was there for. He had to let it go. "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

-It's interesting the word that is used in this verse for "life". There are actually quite a few words in Greek that can be translated as "life", but the word that Jesus uses here is: *psycheen*. This is where we get the english word "psyche" from which literally means "human self or soul." Another interesting thing in the original greek is the dicotomy Jesus sets up between the two words "love" and "hate". The word for "love" (*philo*) has a hoarding or cherish quality to it. One loves by clinging onto. The word for "hate" (*miseo*) has a "separating from" or 'letting go" quality. With this in mind, let me read verse 25 again: "Those who cling to themselves will lose themselves, and those who let go of themselves in this world will keep it for eternal life." Jesus, I don't believe, is giving us a command to "hate ourselves or our life". Instead, he is saying those who cling to their psyche above everything else and not be able to let go will lose themselves.

-Maybe the hour is not some big, grandiose, event but just the time when we can let go of ourselves and those things we think "prop us up".

-I went into the doctor this last week to get my blood drawn for an annual physical. I hate getting my blood drawn and I have to work myself up to actually going into have it done. So, of course, I'm sitting there while the nurse is readying her needle and nervously talking about something (I don't even remember). When she was ready, the nurse came and said: "Ok, you can calm down. You know there isn't anything to worry about. You are doing this to yourself." At that moment, just in her calm and reassuring voice saying these words to me, I was like: oh yeah....this is just me doing this to myself. In that moment I was able to take a breath. We cling to ourselves so much that letting go is incredibly hard. Even for Jesus.

-"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour." Jesus is troubled. It's hard to give up

the crowds, popularity, and attention that prop up one's psyche. It's hard to live for something beyond the self. Yet this is the call.

-Many of you know that my wife, Abby, is due on Friday. Thus, this is probably my last Sunday before leaving on baby-leave for a month (though one never knows). For me, Jesus' words of giving up one's psyche really hit home because when you give up one's psyche or one's life, you don't know what is going to happen. I have no idea what's going to happen and even though there is great joy and excitement, that scares the living piss out of me. Sometimes, I feel like the narrator looking at the mountains of Heaven and thinking: this is too hard, I want to get back on the bus. This isn't what I thought it was going to be. Giving up one's life, it turns out, is something that I know your pastor really needs to practice too.

-I want to stress that word, practice. It is our choice to practice. C.S. Lewis writes in another theological work this: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires to practice joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened." Now, I'm not here to get in a theological debate on hell: if it is a physical place or not. But, for C.S. Lewis, hell was incredibly simple. Hell was not being able to trust God and let go of clinging to oneself. Hell is saying: "this isn't what I expected" and getting back on the bus where it is predictable, easy, self-congratulating, and lonely.

-Turns out, we need others to help us make that walk up the foothills and to the mountains. Even Jesus, I believe (even though they were stubborn and didn't always get it), needed his disciples to lean on in order to let go.

-Thank God for all of you. Thank God for the church and for all communities and relationships that give us the opportunity to choose practicing letting go of ourselves. For the choice is always ours, but we cannot practice it alone. Amen.