

Practicing dying

By [Russell Rathbun](#)

March 23, 2009

While Easter celebrates the event that made death nontoxic, Lent contemplates death. We are called to reflect on our death-making behavior and on the suffering of others. And we focus on Jesus' suffering and death, making more real to us the outrageous love of a God whose first desire is to be with us, who comes not in power or vengeance but in weakness and incomprehensible mercy.

In the gospel reading, Jesus reflects on his coming death and instructs others in the spiritual practice of dying. When he prays, "Father, glorify your name," a voice answers from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The people are unsure of what they've just heard, and Jesus explains: "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine." The voice validates Jesus as the son of the Father as well as the way in which the Father's name will be glorified—Jesus' death.

But Jesus' statement about "this voice" might refer also to his own voice, particularly to the little aria he's just given on the nature of death. Jesus begins this speech by saying that the time of his death has arrived, and the passage ends with him describing the form that death will take: he will be "lifted up" on the cross. So when he explains that "this voice has come for your sake," he's stressing how important it is that his hearers understand what *he* is saying about death.

Jesus explains that the hour of his death initiates "the judgment of this world, [when] the ruler of this world will be driven out" and all people will be drawn to Jesus. As he moves through his death, he draws everyone into it with him—not into his literal death but into a giving up, a relinquishing of one's place in the machinations of this world. The world's rules are the dark and deeply embedded codes of power, rivalry, conquest and self-preservation. They are strategies to convince us that we can come out on top, can cheat death—and it's in this possibility that we place our trust.

Jesus speaks of another way: those who cling to the life prescribed by the world will lose true life. Only by rejecting this pseudo-life system do we gain the voluptuous, transforming life in Christ that is governed by mercy, by love embedded in relationship. It's a life not over and above but *with* God and our neighbor.

Losing your life—following Jesus in this way—results in service, and this service is to be in the presence of God, to be with Jesus (v. 25-26). Dying to the old way of life takes practice, but our psalm offers a beautiful prayer to aid us: "Have mercy on me, O God." Let this be on our lips as we continue to practice dying.

The Greeks who show up at the beginning of the pericope indicate that the gospel has reached significantly beyond its original Jewish audience—signaling that Jesus' hour has come. Their arrival also points to the gospel's postresurrection reach.

Reading this passage, I always want to hear a little more about the Greeks, to know whether they receive what they seek. The scene is a bit odd: they come to Philip, Philip goes to Andrew and then they both go to Jesus. The Greeks say that they "wish to see Jesus." It's a simple request for an audience but perhaps also a desire for deeper

faith: they seek deeper relationship or understanding, to know Jesus and to know him more fully.

This is an appropriate prayer for the Lenten journey. We know Jesus more fully when we see him not only as the resurrected Christ but also as the suffering innocent.