

John 5: 16-47

Have you ever had a cousin, uncle or friend at the Thanksgiving table when they started to tell you about their life and exaggerate stuff – “I was a roadie for Beyonce”, “I helped invent the internet”? You might have thought, ‘this person is crazy’, or at least really full of him or herself? I’m trying to get you into the shoes of the Jewish listeners to Jesus in this passage, but you also have to pile on that they are hearing what appears to them to be not only incredible boasts, but boasts that are deeply blasphemous. Here is a man – he can be touched, his feet were dirty, he probably smelled like sweat – standing in front of them saying that he is God! We need to remember this as we look at our passage today, where Jesus lays bare two parts of the trinitarian God – the God that we know in three persons – in a scholarly and challenging speech to “the Jews” (the “them” in verse 17). The Jews may have been thinking, ‘we have heard this blasphemy before’, as Satan tempted Eve to ‘be like God’ by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (*Gen 3:5*). But Jesus will stress that the difference is that he and the Father are one, unified and equal, not rivals. This speech has generated thousands of books, sermons, and even splits in the church throughout the years as people try to understand what exactly Jesus is saying here – as one commentator that I read wrote, “we are standing on holy ground here”.

These are the Jews who had questioned the man who was healed by the Bethesda pool in Jerusalem, so we are to think that these are Jewish leaders of some kind, as they are questioning Jesus about the laws of breaking the Sabbath. We are told by John that this was another pivot point in Jesus’s ministry, for this is when some of the rulers (not all – remember Nicodemus) decided that Jesus was a threat that needed to be dealt with. We are told in v.16 “the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath” – that is, this was not the only person Jesus healed on the Sabbath, it is just the one that John decided to tell us about: “and for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal to God”.

I have to stop here and say something about John’s use of the terms “the Jews”, especially in light of things that are happening in the world today, including the rise of anti-Semitism, which

we see in attacks on synagogues, for instance. Sometimes John uses these words as simple descriptives: ‘Jesus was buried according to the tradition of the Jews’. And John rarely distinguishes among the groups of Jews, as the other gospel writers do, that is, he rarely says “scribes or teachers of the Law”, “Pharisee”, or “Sadducee”. Scholars are not sure why, but there are several suggestions: John was writing for a largely Gentile audience who would not have understood these distinctions; John is interested in contrasting binaries such as darkness and light, heaven and earth, death and everlasting life, Jews and believers. Because, after all, Jesus was born a Jew and all of his disciples are Jews, as are all the women who served him in his earthly ministry. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying in Matt 23:37, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” And Paul, too, tells us in Romans 9, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel.”

So when John says “the Jews”, he cannot mean each and every person born into the Jewish faith. Our church correctly condemns this interpretation, as does the Catholic church. Each person, it is stressed in John’s gospel, is responsible for his or her own relationship with God, and you cannot point to your descent either to save you or to condemn you. Jesus’s strongest words are reserved for the *teachers* of the Jews who knew the Scriptures but did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God – indeed, Jesus and the gospel writer speak sympathetically of the Jews who believed (8:31-32, 12:11) or were sympathetic bystanders during the raising of Lazarus (11:31-45); and Jesus told the Samaritan woman that ‘salvation is from the Jews’ (4:22). At his crucifixion, the Gentile governor Pilate was just as much to blame as the Jewish leaders who sought to kill Jesus – and Pilate knew this, as he made a big deal out of proclaiming his innocence. So please read this passage in John with those caveats in your mind.

In verse 17, Jesus begins his sermon, in which he asserts his position as Lord over time and rules of the law, while beginning to explain his special relationship to God the Father: “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working”, he says. His listeners understand the implications of this – he is calling God MY father and says his work is God’s work, as we hear in v.18. The Jews would have been more used to Jesus referring to God as the father of all Jews, so Jesus is adding what they perceive as blasphemy to his breaking of their rules for the Sabbath. Jesus is

making clear to us his relationship with the Father, and he knows the Jews now have two choices. Their choice – like ours – is to accept that Jesus is the Son of God, that is, God Himself, or reject him and thus reject the Father’s love for us. This statement launches Jesus into his sermon proper, which commentators call ‘the third discourse’, where Jesus gives us a peek into the Trinity – a subject still full of mystery for us today, even with the full gift of the Spirit, which is why I started with the whole ‘crazy uncle’ thing. The things that now come out of Jesus’s mouth must have been upsetting, as they totally turn Jewish traditional teaching on its head. We certainly need a quickening of the Holy Spirit to understand it, as they did too.

You can read entire commentaries on this section of John, if you wish, so it will be that I can only talk to you about the main points here – but please do read and meditate on the way that we can now approach God, given the unparalleled relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

One thing that Jesus keeps stressing is that he is doing nothing independent of the Father. He only acts after the Father has revealed to him what He wants Jesus to do, which will include (in v.21) raising the dead. This is something that had occurred sporadically in the Old Testament, so the Jews would have had some familiarity with that (*Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6; 2 Kings 5:7*), but again, Jesus pushes them further, saying that HE will be raising the dead – this guy standing in front of them with no rabbinical training, wearing a dusty, sweaty tunic – he’s going to be doing this? And not only that, HE will be the judge on Judgment Day – this guy says he will be judging them for all eternity. Again, this is something that the Jews may have thought was only something God could do, but here is Jesus saying that God the Father has given him all control over this, so that he can bring glory to God the Father. And if you do not honor Jesus, you do not honor the Father. So while we are able to talk about the raising of the dead in spiritual terms – Jesus brings us out of our sins and gives us new life – by the time he gets to the Judgement part, we can no longer only talk about this as a metaphor (*see judging Gen 18:25; son of man = Dan 7:13*). We have to either completely reject Jesus and his work or we accept the close and loving relationship between the Father and Son that makes the Son completely obedient to the Father’s will and in return, understand that everything that Jesus does honors the Father. You simply cannot separate these two persons of the Trinity.

This unity between the Father and the Son results in a gift, too: (v.24) “he who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and does not come into judgement, but has passed out of death into life”. Notice that Jesus does not say, ‘you have to believe in Me’, but you have to believe in the *Father* by listening to Jesus’s words – another example of how Jesus is not out to make himself ‘the man’ but how he constantly points to the Father. But if you will not accept Jesus has been sent by the Father, he is saying, you will be judged to have chosen darkness and will not pass from eternal death to eternal life.

In verse 25 Jesus begins to explain this judgement in more depth – this is the second point of his ‘sermon’. It is not for nothing that he keeps repeating “truly, truly” or “I tell you the truth” – a way of saying ‘this is serious, you need to listen carefully’. And it is not for nothing that here, for the first time in the gospel He calls himself the Son of God. This must have been a real gut punch to the Jews who are listening to him. It’s one thing to call yourself the Son of Man (as Jesus does in v.27) to imply that you are the long-awaited Messiah – whom the Jews of the time thought really would be a man. But this very audacious statement must have rocked the listeners back on their heels.

Thankfully for us and anyone else reading this gospel with a searching heart, Jesus explains what he means when he calls himself this: like the Father, he is the creator of life (v.26; see *Gen 2 for the Father as the source of all life*); the Father has made him the ultimate judge at the End Times, when the dead shall be raised to face judgement along with the living (v.27-29; see *Gen 18:25, Judges 11:27 for the Father as Judge*); and his complete obedience to the Father means that nothing he does has the disapproval of the Father (v.30). In other words, it is impossible to separate the Son from the Father. And I just have to quickly note for v.29: based on all other Scripture, people will not be judged only on their deeds or their works. You have to have accepted Jesus as the Son of God, but Jesus will look at your deeds (as a commentary I read says) as “the test of the faith you profess” -or as James would say, ‘faith without works is dead’: “what good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions?” (*James 2:14*)

Now to the third point of Jesus’s sermon: the legal witness to all of these claims he is making. This is clearly an important point to the Gospel writer, as it brings it up several times while writing about the years he spent with Jesus. Jesus agrees with the people he is speaking to that

they should not just accept his word for who he is (Jewish law demands at least two witnesses, *Deut 19:15*), but they must be open for reasons to believe him. I really love hearing that God is OK with us asking questions like this. He stands ready to answer them, and Jesus tries to drive home his point by switching from the third person – talking about the Son of Man – to the first person “I”. There are five things that point to the truthfulness of what Jesus is saying:

1. The Father himself (v.32, 37). Although Jesus does not mention the Father in v.32 (“there is another who bears witness of Me”), by v.37 he tells the Jews that he was sent by the Father, “who has borne witness of me”. Jesus goes on to say that although they have not heard the voice of the Father, he has. So perhaps we could give the Jews some slack for saying they would need another witness!
2. The prophet John the Baptist (v.33), a person whom the Jews had gone to to ask what was going on, and he had told them “the truth”. Jesus doesn’t need a man to witness to him, he goes on to say in v.34-35, but he is reminding them that they did follow John’s teachings, at least many of them.
3. His own works (v.36): Jesus says that “the witness I have is greater than that of John” – works that he had already pointed out to John, when John sent disciples to ask him if he was the anticipated Messiah (*Matt 11:4, Luke 7:22*). Not only were these the works that the Messiah was prophesied to be able to do, they are done with the full support of the Father. Jesus is again stressing the unity of the Father-Son relationship.
4. Old Testament scripture (v.39): Jesus expects opposition from some Jews, as had been made clear in the prophets long ago. He points out to them that they are correct in looking to the Old Testament to see if his life is lining up with the way that God had promised the Messiah in the law and prophets, but even though they could memorize Scripture, they hadn’t learned to hear God’s voice within those writings, even though the Scriptures testified that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah. Learning isn’t enough, as they were reading it only to find out what they already believed. We need to think about this ourselves – why do we read the Scriptures? Are we open to what God has to say about himself to us, apart from what we think we know about God?
5. The prophecies of Moses himself (v.46): the Jews are proud followers of Moses, whom they know from the Scriptures, but they refuse to even listen to the great lawgiver of the Jewish faith. This is a poignant point, as many Jews believed that Moses and Elijah would be intimately

involved in the coming of the Messiah: for Moses, the Jews listened to *Deut 18:15, 18* where God would raise up a prophet like Moses, the only prophet who had seen God face to face.

Those are the five reasons why the Jews should believe Jesus when he called himself the Son of God; He said that everything and did everything in obedience to the Father's will – and as a result (in v. 41) he would not receive glory or fame from the people he was with, but from the Father himself.

Let's end by focusing on v.42-44 as our main application. Jesus is speaking to people who have studied Scriptures and who have been waiting for the Messiah: "but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another shall come in his own name [that is, without any of these witnesses that Jesus had] you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?" Or, from the Message paraphrase: "I know that love, especially God's love, is not on your working agenda. I came with the authority of my Father, and you either dismiss me or avoid me. If another came, acting self-important, you would welcome him with open arms. How do you expect to get anywhere with God when you spend all your time jockeying for position with each other, ranking your rivals and ignoring God?"

These verses strike deeply into the heart of who I am and how I try to negotiate my relationship with God. I can be so busy working out my own rules for what to expect from God and how I should be judged by Him that I miss the point: Jesus came to Earth and faced my hostility to Him, but still wanted so much for me to have a right relationship with God and be able to spend eternity with Him that he endured all the punishment for my pride in thinking that I had all the answers. All I need to do is to look at the teachings of Moses or search the Scriptures or understand that Jesus controlled the natural world and could and did perform miracles or listen to the teaching of John the Baptist – any one of those things would let me know that Jesus and the Father are united, united in wanting to have a relationship between a sinner and a perfect God. And that's why we celebrate as we read about Jesus' life and teachings in the gospel of John.

Let's pray:

Father, we thank you for sending your Son to the Earth, your perfect, obedient Son, the only one who could settle the debt of our sin and allow us to spend an eternity with Him. We thank you for the ways that you prepared the world for the coming of the Son, by giving us all Scriptures to read and to think about. And we pray as we study John that the truth of your life and work on Earth will sink deeply into our hearts, letting us see the depth of our need for him, but also allowing us great vistas of hope and joy as we come to know you more and more.

Bless the time in the small groups; may my sisters open their hearts to you and to each other. And we thank you that you have promised you will be with us, if we only ask – and so we do. Spirit, come into our midst today and bring the words of Jesus alive in our hearts.