

Message #28

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John

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JESUS IS THE DIVIDER

JOHN 7:25-36

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

You may not have noticed, but we have a president who provokes considerable reactions from Americans. We have the “Make America Great Again” people, and we have the Trump haters. Those of us who don’t exactly identify with either group, still have definite opinions. The President elicits these responses by virtue of his strong rhetoric, daily tweets and policy choices. This week Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the press secretary for the president, was denied service at a Virginia restaurant. Congresswoman Maxine Waters responded by encouraging Americans to respond in a similar way to all Trump officials.

The president’s actions have also produced divisions in the Supreme Court. A sharply divided court this week upheld the president’s travel ban. Hearings this week in Congress showed that there have been strong reactions to Donald Trump among high level FBI and Department of Justice officials. Congress itself in this session has been distinguished by its sharp partisan divide and inability to find compromises. Part of this is a reaction to the president and his agenda.

Jesus had a similar effect upon the world in which He lived. People whom He encountered ended up having definite opinions about Him, and some of them were strong opinions. They were divided opinions. The negative reaction to Jesus led to His execution. Still today Jesus provokes strong reactions. Human rights groups say that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world.

We see some of that in our own country. We have a strong Christian tradition in the US, which is reflected in the founding documents of our country, including the Declaration of Independence which we celebrate this week. But that tradition is being eroded. On our college campuses in recent years, we have seen an increasingly negative reaction to Christianity and to Jesus. Several Christian groups have been booted off of college campuses. I have never heard about that happening to Islamic groups.

A college in Canada, our neighbor to the north, recently sought to establish a law school. Trinity Western University is a Christian college. But the Supreme Court of Canada just ruled that two provincial law societies were right in refusing to accredit the law school because of its Christian views on sexuality.

Jesus has provoked division and strong reactions in our day and in the first century in which He lived. Because of the extraordinary claims that He made, it is important to figure out who He really was and is. For us who are already Christians, the responsibility is to get to know Him better. Such is the focus of the passage before us this morning.

We are working our way through the Gospel According to John. We have seen that the Apostle John organized his material about the life of Jesus around seven sign miracles. We have encountered five of them so far. We have reached Chapter 7 in the book. The events here take place in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles. This was one of the three religious feasts for which all Jewish men were required to attend.

The Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths and Shavuot, was an eight day feast that celebrated the fall harvest and God's provision for their ancestors during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Jesus showed up in Jerusalem in the middle of this feast and began to teach in the temple. (PROJECTOR ON--- TEMPLE 2)

The temple compound had been expanded and renovated by Herod the Great. It was large enough to fit several football fields within it. Rabbis often taught in the inner courtyard near the temple building. (JERUSALEM TEMPLE 8) During a feast like this, the whole area would have been packed with hundreds and thousands of religious pilgrims. It was in this setting that Jesus was talking to a crowd that gathered around Him.

There were at least four sets of players in this dramatic scene. I have divided up the passage before us this morning to analyze the various actors who are involved.

I.

First is Jesus Himself. In vv. 28 and 29 and vv. 33-34 we see that JESUS IS THE GREAT DIVIDER. (I. JESUS IS THE GREAT DIVIDER) The setting for Jesus' comments that begin in v. 28 is expressions of doubt from

the crowd about Jesus' origins. In v. 28 we read, **"So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, 'You know me, and you know where I come from. But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know.'"**

The original word for "proclaimed" is used in John's Gospel of important public announcements that Jesus makes. Our English Standard Translation gives an accurate, literal translation of the words of Jesus. But if we were conveying the sense and meaning behind Jesus' words, I think that it would read more like this: **"So you think that you know Me and where I come from, do you?"**

The implied answer is that they do not. The crowd in front of Him knows certain things about Jesus. From various sources they have learned that Jesus is from Nazareth in Galilee. Back in #6 v. 42 the religious Galilean leaders said, **"Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?"**

The religious leaders in Jerusalem recognize Jesus as a Galilean rabbi. His knowledge of the Scriptures and His miraculous deeds have impressed them. But Jesus has not studied under a recognized rabbi, and He is certainly acting like a loose canon. It is doubtful that they are aware of His roots in Bethlehem, and they probably do not know about the claim that He had a virgin birth.

Earlier in this conversation, Jesus said that He was sent directly from God. Here He is making a similar claim. Prophets of the Old Testament had a divine commission. But Jesus is going beyond that. In His previous visit to Jerusalem, the leaders were ready to kill Him because they recognized that He was claiming to be equal with God. Verse 13 of #5 specifically says that.

At the beginning of this Gospel, the Apostle John argued that Jesus was in the beginning with God and that the creation was the work of His hands. The Apostle Paul picked up on this theme in the New Testament Book of Colossians. (COLOSSIANS 1:16) In v. 16 of #1 he writes, **"For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--- all things were created through him and for him. (COLOSSIANS 1:17) And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."**

The members of Jesus' audience in the temple were all religious Jews. Their thinking would have been that they were all headed for heaven. (PROJECTOR OFF) The men were all circumcised, and their presence at the feast showed that they were generally keeping the Law of Moses. So when Jesus says at

the end of v. 28 that they did not know God, that definitely would have provoked a reaction. His justification for this claim is that if they really knew God, they would recognize Jesus as being their Messiah and Savior.

This is a danger that some people in our culture face. They have some kind of church connection or family religious heritage or were baptized as a child or have a general belief in God. But Jesus is saying that if people do not have a personal connection with Him, they really do not know God.

Skip down to vv. 33 & 34. **“Jesus then said, ‘I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come.’”** Jesus is speaking enigmatically. He is saying things that are not obvious in their meaning to His immediate audience. We readers can suspect that Jesus is talking about His return to heaven.

In what sense will these people be seeking Him? The religious leaders will eventually try to find the body of Jesus. They will be left with an empty tomb that they will have difficulty in explaining. In another sense, some religious Jews are still looking for the Messiah. When we were living in Connecticut, there was a rabbi by the name of Menachem Schneerson (PROJECTOR ON--- MENACHEM SCHNEERSON) who was holding forth in Brooklyn as the head of an Orthodox Jewish group known as the Lubavitchers. When he died in 1994, I watched followers interviewed on New York news stations proclaiming that their rabbi was going to rise from the dead within a few days. They were confident that this would prove that Menachem Schneerson was Israel’s Messiah. It didn’t happen. But still there is a messianic expectation among some of the Jews. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There is a stark warning in the last clause of v. 34 that people in Jesus’ audience will eventually try to find Him, but they will not be able to join Him. Jesus will be in heaven. They will want to go to heaven. But they will not be allowed to join Jesus. Having a relationship with Jesus is necessary for entrance to heaven. This Christianity thing is not just a nice little religious game. The Son of God says that our eternal destiny is dependent upon decisions that we make about Jesus.

Charles Krauthammer (PROJECTOR ON--- CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER) passed away this week. I appreciated many of his commentaries, on TV and in the newspaper. One of his fellow Fox News reporters commented that heaven will be a better place as a result of his passing. That was a nice sentimental comment. But Krauthammer described himself as not religious and a Jewish Shinto who engaged in ancestor worship. He told another interviewer, **“I don’t believe in God, but I fear Him**

greatly.” So he did not meet the requirements that Jesus laid down for joining Him in heaven.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

We need to be careful that we don't miss the opportunity that Jesus' first century audience had, and that we have. The Jews of Jesus' day thought that they knew God, but they did not. Jesus says that He is the way to heaven. That is either true or false. If it is true, we need to make sure that we have connected with Him. The stakes are huge.

II.

One of the groups which responded to Jesus in our story was the Jews of Jerusalem. In vv. 25-27 we find that THE JERUSALEM JEWS ARE SKEPTICAL. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE JERUSALEM JEWS...) They were like Charles Krauthammer. They were not, at this point, out to do in Jesus. But they were skeptical toward His claims. According to vv. 25 & 26, **“Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, ‘Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ?’”**

Last week we saw in vv. 19 & 20 that the religious leaders were seeking to arrest Jesus and have Him killed. Jesus made reference to that plan. The religious pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem from a distance thought that Jesus was being paranoid. They accused Jesus of having a demon. The Jews who live in Jerusalem know better. They have seen the active opposition of the religious leadership toward Jesus, and they have some awareness of their interest in having Jesus killed.

So these people of Jerusalem are surprised that the religious establishment is letting Jesus teach by the temple. The Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism, controls the temple compound. It doesn't appear that any of their priests or rabbis are even on the scene to question or object to Jesus. So these locals toss out the possibility that the leaders are reevaluating their views on Jesus. They may not be convinced of that, but with the apparent inaction of the leaders, they at least mention the possibility.

This is the first time in John's Gospel that people specifically discuss the possibility that Jesus is the Christ. “Christ” is the Greek version of the Hebrew “Messiah.” The term literally means “anointed one.” In Biblical times people were anointed to serve in Israel as kings, priests and sometimes prophets. Jesus will fill all three roles.

The religious leadership is hesitant to act against Jesus for two reasons. For one thing, Jesus has some level of support from some of the people gathered around to listen to Him. They could encounter opposition if they try to seize Him. Secondly, if they seize Jesus in a public setting, there is danger that there could be a public disturbance that would lead to Roman intervention. That would not be good. The Romans had extra soldiers stationed nearby at all of the Jerusalem feasts. They wanted to make sure that there was no trouble. If there was trouble, the Romans might hold the religious leaders responsible. They could decide to change high priests. They could decide to take away some of the power of the Sanhedrin. The religious leaders did not want that.

In v. 27 the people of Jerusalem add, **“But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from.”** The Jerusalem Jews had some awareness that Jesus came from Galilee in the north. Some of them may have known about the prophecy in the Book of Micah, which said that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, which was a few miles to the south of Jerusalem. These guys did not know about the Christmas story that involved the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

There was also a Jewish tradition that the Messiah would show up on the scene suddenly and unexpectedly. They probably got this idea from the Old Testament prophet Malachi. (MALACHI 3:1) In v. 1 of #3 Malachi quotes God, saying, **“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...”** John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the prophecy about one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. The Apostle John finds fulfillment of the prophecy about sudden appearance in the temple in the earlier visit of Jesus when He kicked out the money changers and temple merchants.

The religious leaders were not buying that. Jesus did not fit their expectations. One of their traditions said that the Messiah would show up without any warning and then would bring about a great deliverance for them. Jesus was just causing trouble. According to one tradition (JUSTIN MARTYR QUOTATION), quoted by an early church father by the name of Justin Martyr, **“But Christ--- if He has indeed been born, and exists anywhere--- is unknown, and does not even know Himself, and has no power until Elias comes to anoint Him, and make Him manifest to all.”** (*Dialogue with Trypho*, viii) Jesus was claiming to know that He was the Messiah. So He did not fit this tradition.

(PROJECTOR OFF) The basic point is that the Jews of Jerusalem were skeptical toward Jesus. He did not fit their expectations. He was always talking about the need for repentance. They were confident that they were accepted by God. This charge that they didn't know God did not go over well with them.

Many in our world don't like that message either. We want to think that we are all good people. We all deserve to go to heaven because we are Americans, or because we have a general belief in God. Jesus said that we are all sinners in desperate need of a Savior. Jesus claimed to be that Messiah and Savior.

III.

The third set of actors in this drama is the religious leaders. In vv. 30, 32 and 35-36 THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE ANTAGONISTIC. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE...) According to v. 30, **“So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come.”** The verb translated here as “arrest” can mean “arrest.” Literally, it means “seize.” Who the “they” are in this verse is not completely clear. It could mean that some people in the crowd got upset and tried to grab Jesus. It could be a reference to official action of the religious leaders, which may be going on behind the scene.

What is clear is that there was a divine timetable at work that superseded everything else. “His hour” is used in John’s Gospel to refer to the time of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. The time for that is not yet. The sovereign plan of God is the ultimate reason for the failure of Jesus to be apprehended.

Skip down to v. 32: **“The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him.”** Verse 31 says that some in the crowd are beginning to wonder if this Jesus is the Messiah. The religious leaders don’t want people to start thinking that. They decide that they need to stop this Jesus before he gains more followers and this becomes a movement.

Apparently there is some official action, or approval, given by the Sanhedrin. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had overall control of the province of Judea. But as was the custom in much of the Roman Empire, local officials were allowed to have practical governing authority over most of what went on in the province. The Sanhedrin was composed of the high priest and seventy others, who were priests, rabbis and leading lay people. Most of the rabbis were Pharisees. Most of the priests were Sadducees. The two religious parties often were at odds with each other, largely because they had differing theologies. But when there was a common enemy or threat, as here, they would work together.

We don’t know the exact nature of the instructions that the temple police were given. They may have been given orders to bring Jesus in right away. It is possible that they were told to wait until there was a

good opportunity to seize Jesus. Perhaps to avoid a scene, they wanted Jesus to be grabbed as He left the temple.

Skip down to v. 35. There we read, **“The Jews said to one another, ‘Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?’”** Remember, the term “Jews” in John’s Gospel refers to the religious leaders.

Their comments come in response to Jesus’ statement that He is going away, and they will not be able to find Him. This discussion could have happened right on the scene. My suspicion is that it more likely happened back in their offices as others reported to the religious leaders about what was happening at the scene.

In 722 BC the Assyrians had come down from the north and wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel. Many of the Israelites who survived were taken away to various parts of their empire. In 586 BC the Babylonians came and wiped out Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah. Many of the Jews who survived that invasion were taken off to various parts of their empire. Thus it was that Jews were scattered throughout the Middle East. Some Jews returned to live in Jerusalem and Judah. Those who did not were part of the Dispersion, or the Diaspora. Over time they developed their own communities and built synagogues. Religious Jews would still make an effort to come up to Jerusalem for at least some of the feasts.

So here the religious leaders are entertaining the possibility that when Jesus is talking about going away, He is saying that He might go to these Jewish communities. Some commentators think that the possibility that these leaders consider is that Jesus would teach the Greek speaking Jews. But it is difficult to find anyplace else in the New Testament where the term “Greeks” is used to refer to Greek speaking Jews. It seems to always refer to Gentiles. The Greek translation of the Old Testament also seems to use the word to refer to Gentiles.

So what we have here in our passage is Jews who start out questioning the origins of Jesus. Now we have Jewish leaders discussing His ultimate destination. We also have Jewish leaders unknowingly describing the future expansion of Christianity. For it would be Paul and other Jewish Christian leaders who would go to the synagogues of the Dispersion and preach the gospel. Most of the time the religious leaders would get mad at them, and the Jewish Christian leaders would find a better reception among the Gentiles.

The Apostle John was writing this Gospel late in the first century. We know that his base of operations was in Ephesus in Asia Minor. So his first readers were people of the Dispersion--- Jews and Greeks who had been exposed to the gospel by the early Christian leaders, who were mostly Jewish. The Apostle John recognized the irony of the situation, given the concern of the religious leaders directed toward Jesus decades earlier.

Verse 36: **“What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me.’ And, ‘Where I am you cannot come.’”** The Jews are puzzled. Is Jesus mocking them? Does He have some hidden meaning that we don’t understand?

It is a sad situation. These religious leaders were scholars of the Old Testament law. They were very religious. They had strict rules that they sought to live by. Yet they were antagonistic toward Jesus. He was their Messiah who had come to offer them deliverance. But they rejected Him.

Sometimes today it is religious leaders who are the most antagonistic to the gospel and to the message of the Bible and to true Christians. Sometimes these leaders call themselves Christians. Yet they get mad at Christians for saying that Jesus is the only way to God and that people are sinners who need to be saved and that the Bible is the inspired, authoritative word of God. But such is the message of Jesus.

IV.

Finally, in v. 31 we find a fourth group of people who factor into our story. In v. 31 **MANY OF THE CROWD BELIEVE IN JESUS.** (IV. MANY OF THE CROWD BELIEVE IN JESUS) Verse 31 tells us, **“Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, ‘When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?’”**

Some in this crowd in the temple respond positively to Jesus. The nature of their faith is unclear. In #6 there were large crowds who followed Jesus in Galilee. When He began to make His agenda clear, many of them turned away. Back in #3 Nicodemus was described as one of the people who believed in Jesus because of the miracles that he witnessed in Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Jesus told this religious leader that he had to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. So he had a very limited faith. Yet we will see later in this chapter and this book that Nicodemus seems to develop a genuine faith.

Perhaps that is something of what we have here. Some people in the crowd are attracted to Jesus by His miracles and His message. Their faith is limited. But there is hope that this belief will develop into a genuine commitment. These people will have to realize that there is a cost. This Jesus is a divider of sorts.

In Luke #12 Jesus is quoted (LUKE 12:49) as telling His followers, beginning in v. 49, **“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! (LUKE 12:50) I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! (LUKE 12 51) Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. (LUKE 12:52) For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. (LUKE 12 53) They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”** Jesus, in a sense, is the Great Divider. Following Him involves a cost.

But there are also tremendous benefits. As a result of trusting in Jesus we are promised forgiveness of sins, eternal life and membership in the family of God. Our responsibility is to believe in Jesus.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

James Steward was a pastor of the Church of Scotland and a New Testament professor at the University of Edinburgh. He tells a story about a man who lived in Devon in England in the 1500s. He stayed in the town in which he was raised and became a man of power and influence and wealth. In his earlier life he was friends with a man who went off to sea. Later in life he encountered this friend who had returned after several voyages with the famous explorer Francis Drake.

Supposedly this wealthy man told his old friend, **“Well, you haven’t made much out of all these years, have you?”** The friend responded, **“No, I’ve not made much. I’ve been cold, I’ve been hungry, I’ve been shipwrecked, I’ve been desperately frightened often, but I’ve been with the greatest captain who’s ever sailed the seas.”**

A decision to follow Jesus does not promise wealth and comfort and ease. But it does promise a great adventure with the greatest man who ever lived upon the earth, who is also the Son of God who has promised us a great eternity by faith in Him.