

In Nomine Iesu

Judica, the Fifth Sunday in Lent 2024 Give me that good, old-time religion – John 8:46-59

“Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.’ The Jews answered him, ‘Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?’ Jesus answered, ‘I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.’ The Jews said to him, ‘Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, “If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.” Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?’ Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, “He is our God.” But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.’ So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the God of Abraham. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

As we enter more deeply into the politics of this election year, commentators tell us that the country is deeply divided ... as if we didn’t already know that. It has happened before in our history. And there are more divisions between us than just between red states and blue states of the political map. There is division between black and white, male and female, rich and poor and more. Even the Christian church seems divided - hopelessly so. Some are drawn to ever-newer ways, means, and styles of worship, leaving others who, for lack of a better term, just want “that good old-time religion.” Of course, **no one seems able to define exactly what “that old-time religion” is in a way that everyone else agrees with.** You will not be surprised to hear that this inability to agree on “that good, old-time religion” is in itself nothing new, as we can see from the account in John’s gospel today.

I

We see this division in the reaction that Jesus Himself crystallized in His own day. Some of the Jews, the descendants of Abraham, who listened to Jesus that day He spoke with them in Jerusalem’s temple believed that He truly was the Messiah, the promised Savior of Israel. They accepted what He said. They had seen the miracles He’d done. They’d perceived the authority and power with which He preached and taught. At the same time even they had difficulty grasping all Jesus said and did. Sometimes we too have trouble understanding. That is one of the reasons why we return regularly to hear God’s word proclaimed and explained.

But others who heard Him that day thought He was a dangerous and unpredictable advocate of something new and strange, who threatened what they considered to be “that old-time religion.” At first they thought the safest reaction was to ignore Him and hope that He would go away. But His words and actions caused them to fear for the security of their lives and of their nation. He was dividing the people. Still others accused Him of being insane or even possessed by an evil spirit. At last they could ignore Him no more. They confronted Him. They accused Him. They argued and denounced Him. And then they blamed Him for stirring up division that polite, responsible people always try to smooth over. Remember the old saying: Polite people never discuss politics or – especially! – religion.

To those who disbelieved Him that day in the temple, Jesus had said earlier, “‘I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.’ ... ‘If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I came from God and I am here; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me.’” (John 8:37-45) His words drew a line in the sand, a dividing line.

Those who refused to believe what Jesus said about Himself that day in the temple were no different than any who walked the narrow, uneven lanes of Jerusalem or, for that matter, drive the wide, (mostly) smooth roads of Tacoma today. They were no more or less righteous before God according to their words and works than anyone else. In their favor was the fact that they were the offspring of Abraham, at least physically, and spoke his language. They were of the same heritage as Jesus Himself. But they were not members of **Abraham’s “old-time religion,”** to whom God promised: “‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them’ And He said to him, ‘so shall your descendants be.’ And [Abraham] believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” (Genesis 15:5-6) They really were not spiritual descendants of Abraham. **Old-time religion for them meant what they were accustomed to,** a religion that trained its adherents to trust in their own goodness before God or, more accurately, their own **not-so-badness** in comparison to other people, other nations, other religions.

II

Abraham knew God, the great and only God, the Triune God. He knew Him as ‘El Elyon’, that is, ‘God most High.’ Hundreds of years later, Moses, himself a faithful son of Abraham, stood before a burning bush on the slopes of Mt. Sinai, asked this same faithful and merciful God, who never breaks His promises: “‘Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they say to me, “What is His name?” what shall I tell them?’ And God said to Moses, ‘I AM is who I am.’ And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you” ... This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations.’” (Ex. 3:13-15) He could just as well have said, “This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations. Old-time religion, **truly good old-time religion,** believes Me just as Abraham did.”

When the people who listened to Jesus that day in the temple grasped what He was saying, that long-dead Abraham knew and believed in the One who stood before them it came as a shock. We can only imagine what they felt as the implications of what He said began to sink in. "Then the Jews said to Him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?'" Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, **before Abraham was, I AM.**'" (vv. 57-58) With those words He claimed the title 'El Elyon - God most high.' He identified Himself as the God of Abraham, whom Abraham knew and, just as importantly, who knew Abraham, and called Him His own. With those words Jesus of Nazareth made the astounding assertion, that He was the Son of His eternal Father, who sent Him into the world to become Man, to bear the sins of all people and with His suffering and death, atone for them all. All the faithful of the Old Testament believed in this God. All called upon His name, and He in turn called them His own dear children – Abraham and Moses, all the great heroes of faith of Israel. This was **that good, old-time religion**. Every other religion was divided, false, misled by the pride and arrogance of men.

The words and works of Jesus will always provoke one of two reactions, either **disbelief** - whether expressed in heated outrage or in cold, silent disapproval – or **trust** of a simple, even childlike sincerity. The words and works of the Savior in whom Abraham and Moses believed will always stand firm and unmoving dividing Caiaphas from Joseph of Arimathea, Judas from Peter, one crucified thief from the other. It will always stand firm in the midst of division and confusion.

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Dear friends, we sit here today in this humble church dedicated to the glory of the same God, to hear His word, to receive the promise of life and forgiveness that He gives freely to all who call on His name. **What Jesus said 2000 years ago in the temple remains as true today as it was then, just as what He said that day was as true as when God most high first promised a Savior from sin to Abraham 2000 years before that.** The promise was valid in Abraham's day, valid when Jesus walked in the temple. It remains valid today. God, the living God, the faithful and trustworthy God of the Holy Scriptures, kept His promise of salvation through faith in the coming Savior to Abraham. He will keep that same promise to you today. The way of salvation from sin and death lies open to you. **The good old-time religion, the faith of Abraham**, still stands firm, as St. Paul said: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. **For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.** There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, **then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**" Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria