

John 7:1-13

I heard a story once about a young Coast Guard recruit who had just finished his training at the Academy and who had not been long at his first post when a distress call came in from a ship that was struggling not too far offshore. And so the team quickly made preparations to set out after this ship and *into* what was the cause of its trouble: a fierce storm with very powerful winds.

Well, as soon as they finished their preparations, they began heading out into the storm. And as their vessel moved further and further away from shore, and as the waves climbed higher and higher, the young recruit began to get nervous. And as conditions worsened his nervousness changed to alarm and finally his alarm became outright fear. And at that point the young recruit could no longer restrain himself and he went and found the captain and said to him, "With all due respect, Sir, if we continue on in this way, there is a good chance we won't make it back". At which point the captain said to him, quite calmly, "It's alright son, *we don't have to make it back. But we do have to go*". Happily for that young man, they actually did make it back, and he lived to tell the story.

But here's the question: What was the Captain saying to the young recruit? Well, I'll tell you one thing he was saying: He was saying that the number one priority for that Coast Guard unit, the driving motive, the purpose, the AGENDA was to preserve life, at all costs, even at the risk of one's own. And THAT agenda influenced everything - every action, every response, every decision.

If their agenda had been something else - for example, the preservation of one's OWN life no matter what - then that would have resulted in different actions, different choices, and different results. An agenda like that might well see a ship turning around when the weather got a little bit rough. An agenda like that might see a lot of distress calls go unanswered.

But the point is, a person's or even an agency's agenda has a lot to do with the choices they make, the way they live, the things they say. And if you understand what the agenda is, then their actions will make sense to you. If you don't understand it, then their actions and decisions *won't* make any sense to you.

The same sort of reality is often seen in child-rearing and was driven home to me by a writer named Michael Popkin in a book called *Active Parenting*. One of Popkin's main contentions in his book is that the behavior of children, while in some ways is always a reaction to something in the past or a result of things that have happened, the reality is that most of their behavior is *goal driven*.

In other words, Popkin suggests that when a parent is trying to understand and address a particular behavior of his/her child that is particularly upsetting or worrying, then the more important diagnostic question to ask is not, "What is causing this behavior? or Where is this coming from?" but rather "What is the GOAL of this behavior? What is the child trying to get or accomplish through this behavior?"

In short, Popkin's contention was that we would do better to spend less time examining a child's *past* and, instead, spend our energies trying to understand what the child's AGENDA is. If we understand *that*, then their actions and choices may make more sense to us - even if they are not the best way of achieving what they want. Conversely, if we don't understand what the goal is, or what the AGENDA is, then we may well find our child's behavior to be quite mystifying.

In the passage before us this morning, we see Jesus as a man with a definite agenda but one which, unfortunately, is not understood or appreciated very well, if at all, by many of those around him - and as a result, the mis-understandings about him continue, and grow.....

Now, before we turn to the passage itself, let me say by way of reminder - especially for those of you who may be with us for the first time this morning - that we are in the midst of a *continuing* series of studies on John's Gospel. In this book of the bible John is telling his readers the "good news" or *gospel* of Jesus Christ - who he is and why he came. And while John wants all people to hear and receive this news, he is especially concerned - since his gospel is the last of four in total - but he is especially concerned that his fellow Jews would be persuaded through what he wrote to believe that Jesus was the one that God promised to send in the OT Scriptures - the Messiah, sent to save and deliver his people from their sins.

Of course, the challenge that John faced in all this was the same one that was depicted in the pages of his Gospel and which Jesus himself faced, in increasing proportions, throughout his ministry. Because while Jesus *was* most certainly the Messiah, he was not the sort of Messiah or "Savior" that the people were looking for or had been taught to look for by the religious establishment. And it was *their* - i.e., the religious authorities' *reputation* and *their authority* that was now at stake because of this upstart - "Jesus". Indeed, his actions and words had challenged them at every turn, including challenging them in areas where they would have regarded themselves as "experts" - such as the Mosaic Law.

And so, not surprisingly, the net result of all this is that Jesus has made some serious enemies among the religious leaders - so much so that things are now at a crisis point. The authorities have decided that Jesus must go and so have been looking for an opportunity to kill him.

That should be enough to set the stage for us this morning. Let's pray together and then we'll read the passage (Pray and read).

Now as we delve into these verses a little bit more deeply, the first thing we need to do is *remember*. You have to remember, for starters, where we are in the overall "timeline" of Jesus' ministry. As you most likely know already, the main events of his life all took place in the space of about 3 years. And so, while we do not have *exact* figures on this sort of thing, it seems that at this point in John's Gospel about two years have passed and we are into the third and final year of his ministry, possibly even the final six months of his ministry. Which means that we are now only about 6-12 months away from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem which will then lead directly to his arrest and crucifixion. So, it's a tense time. To be sure, the time for his final revelation has not *yet* come - but it is close.

Another thing to remember is that the events here are taking place not too terribly long after the feeding of the 5000. And the key thing to recall in all of *that* is what happened at the conclusion of that miracle. Do you remember? *The people wanted to make Jesus a king*. Now even *more* time has passed since that took place and now, ironically, the very opposite sort of thing seems to have happened. Instead of people clamoring to make him be their ruler, he has endured *mass defections*. Many of his very own disciples have turned and walked away.

So, one minute they want to make him a king. The next minute people are walking away from him in droves. The crowds are fickle. They don't know what to think about Jesus. And all of this means that in this final year of his life and ministry Jesus finds himself walking this narrow path between caution and risk, between doing things privately and doing things openly. The crowds will have their part to play soon enough, but Jesus wants to be sure that neither he nor they get ahead of God's timing. So he has to *manage his appearances* here at the end of his ministry more than he ever has before.

Moving on from those reminders, the next thing I want you to notice here is the religious authorities' continued misunderstanding of Jesus, as highlighted in verse 1 of chapter 7,

After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews¹ were seeking to kill him.

Now when John says "the Jews" here, he is not thinking of the Jews in general but of the Jewish religious authorities in particular, as the context shows. And these authorities, as we have seen already, have made up their minds that Jesus must go. But why, specifically, is that? What is it about Jesus that has drawn such deep hatred and anger from them?

Well, on the surface, it would seem that they wanted to kill him for several reasons. They wanted to kill him because while they could not say for sure who they thought he was, they were certain that he was not the Messiah and that he was leading people astray. Even further, not only was he leading people astray, he was saying things that they regarded as being downright blasphemous - at least according to their misunderstandings about Jesus, they were blasphemous. Finally, they wanted to kill him because he was flagrantly violating what they believed to be the correct interpretation and application of the Scriptures.

Now, to give them a little bit of credit here, you can certainly see how, given their lack of understanding and acceptance of Jesus' true identity, they might have felt the way they did about him. But even so, there was more going on here than just an identity problem. One writer, named Rayburn, put it this way:

".....the gospels make it clear that the largest part of the problem was envy. [The religious authorities] were jealous of his popularity, of his power, of the authority of his teaching, even, dare we say it, of his goodness. They gnashed their teeth at the sight of the immense crowds that rushed to see him wherever he went. They may not have said much publicly - like anyone else they would have known how it would have sounded - but they hated the sight of those whom he had healed, the people who had been possessed

of demons now walking about sound in mind and cheerfully giving thanks to God and Jesus for their deliverance. They hated goodness itself because it did not serve their own interests. It was so obvious – the envy that motivated the religious leaders against Jesus – that even Pontius Pilate could see it, according to the Gospel of Mark (15:10).....Now, to be sure, they would never have put it that way to themselves or to anyone else. They would never have admitted, even to themselves, that they were eaten up with pride and jealousy....Later they would speak of the threat he posed to the public order and to Rome's willingness to allow the Jews a measure of self-government. But, that is an old ploy. Controversies that are really about power and position are always posed in terms of good order instead..."

The religious authorities were envious of Jesus. They were jealous of him, and the things that he had done which they could not deny. And all the high and mighty language that they could marshal to suggest otherwise can never hide that basic fact.

And so the religious authorities did not understand who Jesus was, and as a result of that, and of their envy and jealousy, their actions showed it. But they were not alone in that. Jesus' own brothers - i.e., half brothers, born to Mary and Joseph after Jesus was born - but his own brothers were no further along in understanding and embracing Jesus for who he truly was, and their suggestions, recorded here, as to what he should do were proof enough of that,

Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was at hand. ³ So his brothers¹ said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. ⁴ For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." ⁵ For not even his brothers believed in him.

Now, if you're not sure of what this "Feast of Booths" is about, let me try and fill in a couple blanks for you. The Feast of Booths is also called the Feast of Tabernacles and has its roots in the OT - and in passages like Exodus 23, Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16. The feast itself lasted for about 7 days and at the end - on the 8th day - there was a special assembly. Extra biblical writers tell us that it was the most popular feast in that day and age which means that it was *the time when the most people were around*. And as these people came into Jerusalem, there was only so many places to stay and, as a result, they would construct these temporary dwellings or "booths" to live in during the week long celebration - not unlike what some people will do, or used to do when they came into town to observe the New Orleans Jazzfest, setting up tents or living in temporary "dwellings" like caravans and RV's.

And so, in the middle of all this going on with the "Feast of Booths" Jesus' brothers give him some "advice". They tell him that he needs to go to Jerusalem and basically show them his stuff. Now why do they say this? Why do they offer this advice?

Well, for one thing, they say this because, in fact, Jesus can do amazing and miraculous things. They know it. They've seen it. There's no denying it. They have no doubts about Jesus' ability to do these sorts of things.

Remarkably, however, John says that, in spite of the fact that they believe Jesus *can do these sorts of things*, they do not actually believe in *him*. (Although they will become believers later on - e.g., Acts 1:14.)

At any rate, because his brothers didn't *really* believe in him - that is, didn't believe in him for who he really was and for what he came to do - because they thought, instead, that Jesus was out to build an earthly kingdom or to draw a crowd, or a movement, then they looked with very practical, worldly eyes at the situation and concluded - hey, lots of people, lots of excitement, big religious festival, most important city around - what better time and place for Jesus to re-build what he has lost and recover more disciples and so advance his movement? It seemed pretty logical to them, no doubt.

And yet Jesus does not take them up on their suggestion, which must have surprised and confused them. According to their view of Jesus' agenda, this was a golden opportunity. But such a thing was not at all in line with Jesus' *own* understanding of his purpose. From Jesus' own perspective - and from that of his Father's - it is not yet time for him to make his big public entrance into the City of Jerusalem. To be sure, that time is coming, but it is not here yet. As a result he tells them to go on ahead to the city, without him.

And you have to understand that if Jesus had gone with them at that moment, it would very much have been a big public thing. He would have gone in the midst of this massive pilgrimage of people, marching in through the gates of the city, singing and celebrating. And that sort of religious fervor had great potential for being hijacked by zealous followers eager to make him a king, or to incite a riot. And Jesus' was concerned that things were not pushed toward a conclusion that, apparently, it was not time for them to arrive at.

Lisa and I have friends who served in Indonesia for a number of years, and who, during the month of Ramadan - which is a time of high devotion for the Muslim peoples - but during that month they always made sure that they were extra careful about their movements and activities as it often did not take much for people in this time of heightened religious expectation to be incited into all sorts of actions - and many of them not good for any Christian who happened to be standing around.

I think that Jesus is aware of the possibility of a similar sort of dynamic taking place amongst the people in that day. And so he doesn't go with them to the feast. It is not yet time for him to go to the city *in that way*. It is not yet time for all eyes to be upon him. It is not yet time for him to take center stage in Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, his determination not to go into the city at the advice of his unbelieving brothers, or in the way and at the time that they have suggested, his determination NOT to do merely what *they* think would be best - none of that precludes him from making any sort of trip to the city - not to observe the Feast, but to engage in other work, and in a less conspicuous manner.

As a result, it ought not surprise us too greatly that, after refusing to accompany his brothers to the feast, he later on (vs10) determines to go on into the city - again not as part of a public processional, but instead to go up *after the fact*, after all of that has passed through, and after the Feast has begun and almost finished. His purpose was not to be part of the main festivities, but to engage in other matters. As Carson puts it,

“Jesus’ response to his brothers is not that he is planning to stay in Galilee forever, but that because his life is regulated by his heavenly Father’s appointments he is NOT going to the feast when they say he should. The counsel of the wicked (Ps 1:1) cannot be permitted to set the agenda. His “not” turns down his brothers’ request; it does not promise he will not go to the Feast when the Father sanctions the trip.”

Now, having said that, I want to come back to this fascinating reality that his brothers, on the one hand, have a kind of belief in Jesus and yet John very plainly declares that they do not actually believe *in him*. In other words, believing in Jesus must mean something more than just believing he can do amazing, even miraculous things.

Given the context here, it must mean, at the very least, that a person believes that Jesus is who he says he is and has done and is doing all that the Father has given him to do. Any other sort of “belief”, any lesser sort of belief, doesn’t count, doesn’t register on the scale of “true belief”.

Which is another reason why we, as witnesses to Jesus in our own day and age, have to make sure to PRESENT Jesus to people in ways that clearly show his identity and purpose as the *Son of God sent to save sinners* - any other portrait of Jesus that we present - and upon which people “believe” will not result in a saving belief. The goal is not to get people to admire and appreciate Jesus. Jesus is not looking for admirers. He is looking for disciples. He is looking for *worshippers*.

Well, having made clear that there was a definite difference between his brothers’ understanding of his agenda, and his own understanding (and that of his Father), Jesus then goes on to say some things that very succinctly summarize one of the core differences between the two different perspectives,

Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. ⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. ⁸ You go up to the feast. I am not¹ going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.” ⁹ After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

Jesus describes himself here as the one who gives the world the bad news that its works are evil. *He is the one that says what no one wants to hear*. He is the one that tells people the hard truth that they are unwilling to accept, that shows them up in their self-righteousness and sin. You can’t have a savior without someone needing to be saved. You can’t call people to repent unless there is something to repent of. To be sure, Jesus IS the one who brings the good news of the kingdom, but before he brings the good news, he has to deliver the bad news. As one

writer puts it, he is like the doctor who tells the person of their life-threatening condition and potentially terminal situation - right before he tells them of the cure.

And this points us, then, to what one writer calls "...the first difference between those who come to Jesus and believe in him and those who refuse to come and instead take offense at him. [The difference is] that the first group knows they are bad and acknowledges that they need God's mercy and the other group – whatever they may say for public consumption (for even the proudest man rarely is stupid enough to declare that he thinks himself better than others) – they do not really think themselves bad and they do not really wonder if God could be merciful to people as sinful as they are..." And there, this same writer puts it, is our problem. He continues,

We cannot get started with our friends and our neighbors and our workmates, we cannot get started telling them of Jesus Christ and how he can save them without telling them in one way or another that they need to be saved, that they are sinners, that God's wrath rests upon them, that they are so habitually sinful that they could never in themselves make themselves good enough for God. That is not a popular message, but it is the essential first step in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was for Christ and it must be for us. If one does not think he needs saving from his sins, then Jesus Christ can be of no great importance.

And as C. S. Lewis observed – "The Christian religion...does not begin in comfort; it begins in...dismay... In religion, as in war and everything else, comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth – only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair."

This sort of thing is crucial to remember, especially in this day and age when the temptation is to soft peddle Jesus. To be sure, we live in a world that IS fallen and broken in so many ways. And people HAVE been devastated by that and greatly sinned against. And we do struggle with hurt and things that have wounded us in terms of who we are and how we see ourselves. But we have to be careful there because so often what lies deep behind our woundedness and hurt and struggles with self-image and self-esteem that Jesus is said to be the great cure for - what can lie behind many of these struggles is an insidious evil, and yet perhaps the oldest evil of all - PRIDE. Once more, Rayburn is helpful here,

[The insidious evil of pride is so widespread that it is not at all illegitimate to suggest] that the person with an inflated self-image and the person with a low self-image may both be equally proud in thinking so much of themselves and seeing the world so much in terms of themselves. Both are, as the Bible says human beings and are at the root, lovers of themselves. They are all, as Augustine described them, homo incurvatus in se, "man curved in on himself." How subtle pride is. It rages even in the heart of the man or woman who is torn by the thought that he or she is a nobody. And this pride, this self-love, this self-worship is then the root of all other sins as we seek before all else, our own pleasure, our own power, our own glory, our own peace and prosperity, no matter God's will, no matter the welfare of others.

And so we have to be careful. On the one hand, we have to recognize that people are hurt and hurting and that there is real comfort and healing on offer for people, even people who feel that they are no one and nothing in this world. It is not an illegitimate thing to tell people in that situation that Jesus offers hope and healing and restoration.

On the other hand, we have to have the moral courage to say to people who ARE hurting that they are ALSO sinful and that *their* sin is why they need a savior. We have to be willing to say to people - even hurting people - they need more than Jesus the miracle worker, they need the Savior who died for their sin. They need to see the pride that so often lies behind their struggles. Even when people devalue themselves that can be coming from a deep-seated pride and a desire to be loved and admired and the object of peoples adulation and affection. And we have to be careful to address the hurt, without at the same time nurturing the very pride that only serves to feed and grow and sustain it.

Jesus came into this world, to do his father's will which included, among other things, being the one that told people the hard truth about themselves that they were usually unwilling to accept. And the world hated him for it. And Jesus has commissioned his church to continue on with this task - bringing the good news, which also means bringing *the bad news* that people don't want to know about.

We need to pray that we will have the moral courage to take up this commission which we have been given and to carry it forward, being driven by God's agenda, and not our own agendas of self-preservation, or reputation-preservation, or comfort-preservation - or whatever the competing agenda might be. We need to be prepared to carry forward Christ's mission, and to be hated as much as he was hated for doing it.

But as we do, my prayer is that we will have the strength of vision to see that unless we are willing to tell people the truth about themselves, then telling them the truth about Jesus won't make any difference.