

Gospel of John Series: The Great Divider John 7:1-36 7/1/18

When our mission team leaves for the village of Cantamayec, Mexico next week, we'll encounter people who are very different from us. We will speak different languages, value different things, have different national loyalties, and have very different lifestyles. But in spite of those differences, we will almost certainly find unity with those Mexican Christians because we are fellow followers of Jesus Christ. Unity! It's one of the things we Christians like to celebrate about Jesus- his ability to bring different kinds of people together and unify them. Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, people of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, etc. And yet, this week's chapter in John's gospel reminds us that one of the common effects of Jesus' teaching and ministry when he was on earth was to divide people! As we read these stories about Jesus, notice the many different reactions to him.

After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him.² Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. ³So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; ⁴for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world."⁵ (For not even his brothers believed in him.) ⁶Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your

time is always here. ⁷The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. ⁸Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come.” ⁹After saying this, he remained in Galilee. (John 7:1-9)

Those of you from Roman Catholic backgrounds may be surprised to learn that Jesus had brothers (and sisters, too!). But the gospels mention them in several different places. And the family dynamics which underlie Jesus' interactions with his family are fascinating! For example, can you imagine having Jesus as your older brother? Might that create parental expectations that are unrealistically high for you? At any rate, Jesus' brothers encourage him to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Festival of Booths, which commemorated the successful passage of the Hebrew people through the wilderness after the Exodus. They believe that Jesus needs a bigger arena in which to show off his power so he can become more popular.

Jesus refuses to accept their advice. He says that his “time has not yet come.” This phrase is used several times in John's gospel. It refers to the time of his execution and resurrection. The Festival of Booths was held in the early Fall. Jesus' crucifixion would come at the next Jewish festival (Passover) in the Spring. He knows this is not the right time. Jesus is in control of his destiny.

The brothers' reaction to Jesus has some parallels today. They don't fully believe in Jesus, in the sense of committing their lives to follow him. But they are impressed by his miracles and teaching, and they value fame and numbers. The danger for them (and us) is trying to synthesize our beliefs and values with those of Jesus, rather than submitting our agendas to Jesus' scrutiny to see if they are worthwhile. Let's keep going.

¹⁰But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. ¹¹The Jews were looking for him at the festival and saying, "Where is he?" ¹²And there was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying, "He is a good man," others were saying, "No, he is deceiving the crowd." ¹³Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews. (John 7:10-13)

Jesus goes to the festival anyway, but on his own terms. Notice that John highlights the divisions among the crowd as they anticipate his appearance. Some think he's a good man, while others see him as a deceiver, someone who is leading the people astray. Let's keep going.

¹⁴About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. ¹⁵The Jews were astonished at it, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" ¹⁶Then Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. ¹⁷Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from

God or whether I am speaking on my own. ¹⁸*Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him. (John 7:14-18)*

In this part of the passage and in the following verses, three different questions are raised about Jesus. The first question: *“How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?”* The common practice for anyone who wanted to teach the scripture was to sit under the instruction of a well-regarded rabbi and learn from him. The Jewish leaders know that Jesus hasn’t had that kind of training, which makes them very skeptical about his teaching, but they can’t explain his deep level of understanding the scripture. Where did that come from, and what is the source of his authority?

Jesus’ answer is simple. He gets it from the Heavenly Father who sent him. And he tells them that if they truly desire to follow God’s ways, they will know where his teaching comes from. He then tackles a criticism that has been leveled against him, that he healed a man on the Sabbath, which we read about back in chapter 5.

¹⁹*“Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?”* ²⁰*The crowd answered, “You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?”* ²¹*Jesus answered them, “I performed one work, and all of you are astonished.* ²²*Moses gave you*

circumcision (it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs), and you circumcise a man on the sabbath. ²³If a man receives circumcision on the sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the sabbath? ²⁴Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment." (John 7:19-24)

Ignoring the charge of the crowd that he must be demon-possessed, Jesus uses a pretty sophisticated argument to justify the healing he did on the Sabbath, which was forbidden by their rules. He notes first of all that they don't follow the law themselves, as they are trying to kill him, which is a clear violation of God's law! Regarding the Sabbath, he points out that they make exceptions to keeping the Sabbath law themselves! All Jewish boys were required to be circumcised on the 8th day after their birth, even if that day fell on the Sabbath. Jesus asks them, "If it is permissible to do that kind of work on one part of the body on the Sabbath, why is it not permissible to heal a whole body on the Sabbath?" The religious leaders seem to be unable to respond to his argument. The story continues.

²⁵Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, "Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? ²⁶And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? ²⁷Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from."²⁸Then Jesus cried out as he

was teaching in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him.”²⁹ I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.”³⁰ Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.³¹ Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, “When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?” (John 7:25-31)

The crowds are again divided about Jesus, with some people thinking that Jesus may indeed be the Messiah. But others raise a second question, wondering about Jesus’ origin. There was a popular belief in those days that the Messiah would simply appear out of nowhere, and no one would know where he came from. Since they know that Jesus comes from Galilee, how can he be the Messiah? Jesus doesn’t deny his human origins, but states that he has been sent from God. If they knew God, they would understand this, he says. Again, the crowd is divided, with some believing he is the Messiah, and others trying to arrest him. Notice that they can’t pull off the arrest. Why? Because “his hour had not yet come.” But there’s still an awful lot of division about Jesus’ identity. Let’s finish out this passage.

³²The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest him.³³ Jesus then

said, "I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me." ³⁴You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." ³⁵The 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?" ³⁶What does he mean by saying, 'You will search for me and you will not find me' and 'Where I am, you cannot come'?" (John 7:32-36)

The Pharisees, having heard that many were becoming convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, join together with the chief priests to arrest him. This was a very unusual pairing, as the Pharisees and chief priests did not get along! Jesus then causes them to raise a third question, this time about his destiny, about where he is going. As usual, they take him too literally, speculating that he is planning to leave Israel and go to other countries. But Jesus' means that he is going to return to heaven. In fact, "heaven" is the answer to all three of their questions. Where do you get your teaching and authority? Heaven. Where are you from? Heaven. Where are you going? Heaven!

Throughout this passage we have noted the wide range of reactions to Jesus. Some, like his brothers, try to get Jesus to act based on their values and agendas. Some believe he is a good man. Others believe he is deceiving the people, which is a serious charge. The religious leaders

are skeptical about him, because he lacks the proper credentials. Some even think he is evil, possessed by a demon! And others believe he is the Messiah, putting their trust in him.

In some ways, things haven't changed much today. Jesus still prompts division everywhere that he is proclaimed! That is because he claimed to be the unique Son of God, thereby giving him unique authority over all creation, over governments, over religion, and over the lives of individuals like you and me. The religious leaders of Jesus' day felt threatened because Jesus was shining a bright light on the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of their religious beliefs and practices. Today religious leaders (like me) aren't terribly excited to have Jesus poking around at our inconsistencies and hypocrisies either!

What all of us would like, is to have a Jesus who will take our priorities, goals, and beliefs about life and help us make them work. But Jesus won't do that. He calls us out when our goals and priorities and beliefs aren't worthwhile or are untrue, and calls us to replace our preferences with his. That's because he cares about us and about our world, and he knows how life was created to work. So, he won't leave us wallowing in patterns that are harmful to us and others. He cares too much about us to do that. That then leaves us with a choice, a choice that divided people then and divides them now. Do we believe in Jesus enough

to entrust our lives to him each day and in every detail? That was the crucial question in the first century, and it's the crucial question today.