

‘What do you know?’

John 7

David A. Renwick

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In our Sunday sermons we’ve been looking together at the story of Jesus as it comes to us in one of the four accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry that we have in the pages of the Bible. We have four accounts: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; and it’s John’s account that we have been focusing on. Each of them tells the story of Jesus in a slightly different way, like artists painting a portrait of the same person, so that we catch a different glimpse, a different facet, of Jesus’ life and ministry.

In John’s Gospel in particular, in the opening chapters, John wants us to see the change that Jesus makes in the lives of individual people whose lives somehow intersect with Jesus’ life:

- We’ve seen the lives of four men, young men whose lives were impacted by Jesus so much that Jesus’ authority over their lives pulled them away from their work and from their home. They became his closest followers, among the twelve closest followers of Jesus - willing to go wherever Jesus went.
- By way of contrast, we’ve seen Jesus’ influence on a woman in a lonely place, a place called Samaria, -- a woman whose life was completely falling apart, and who was amazed that Jesus would speak to her; amazed that Jesus could see straight through her, knew exactly what had been going on in her life, and yet loved her - did not condemn her. And when she realized this, when the lights went on, that he knew but did not condemn - instead of leaving home, she actually went back home and found the relationships back at home which had been destroyed by her life and her way of living, found those relationships healed and in order again.

So some leave, some go back home - all are changed. Jesus is in big gatherings and in small gatherings.

- Like a wedding in a small town called Cana, not far from Nazareth where he was raised. He’s there with his family; he’s there with his friends. And there is a social disaster - the kind that we know about. In this case, the wine runs out. We’ve been there! We know what it’s like to plan an event and something goes wrong. In this case, in a small community, a place where shame is of real importance, and standing in the community is of importance - when the wine runs out, it’s social disaster for the young couple getting married. But Jesus is interested in that, and he uses his power to take water and turn it into wine, and to save the day, to bring back the ‘spirit of the party’ to that place, which is what he wants to do with your life and my life.
- Or we meet Jesus on a hillside, with crowds of people. And Jesus, the Son of God, is doing what he ought to be doing. He’s teaching people spiritually. All day long, he feeds them with the Word of God. But they get to the end of the day, and they need to be fed with just - well, with just ‘food’! And Jesus is interested in that, as well: plain, basic, food! “What are we going to do,” he says to his Disciples, “to feed this crowd?” And he’s talking materially, not spiritually. And the Disciples say, “Well, there’s nothing we can do. There are far too many of them.” Except for Andrew, who says, “I’ve found a friend.” And with his friend, and with five loaves and two fish, handed over to Jesus to be blessed, the crowd are fed.

And we come to realize that he might be able to do something with our lives, too, small and insignificant as they may be, if we take them and hand them over to him to be blessed.

Or one final incident in the opening chapters of John's Gospel, as John draws us into the stories of all kinds of people whose lives are changed by Jesus.

- Jesus meets an intellectual, a man by the name of Nicodemus, one of the 70 most powerful people in Israel under the authority of the Romans at that time. And he comes to Jesus with his question by night, because he is embarrassed to admit to his friends that he is interested in this country preacher from the north. So he comes to Jesus by night with his questions, and Jesus treats him seriously and challenges him, but does not force him to commit what we would call 'intellectual suicide' by deciding right there and then what he's going to do with Jesus! He's not ready yet, and Jesus respects that! Jesus listens and challenges, and Nicodemus leaves that meeting, without making a decision to follow Jesus Christ. But one of the glorious things about John's Gospel is that in the story we can follow Nicodemus' story, and when we come to the end of the gospel, we see that Nicodemus is no longer afraid. He's one of the few - all the other Disciples have run away, afraid - he's one of the few men who stay by Jesus when he is crucified; and he is there to take him down from the cross and place him in the tomb when Jesus dies. In his lengthy spiritual journey, his life is eventually transformed by this man Jesus who took his questions seriously.

So we are presented with this Jesus, in the opening chapters of John's Gospel, as a man who loves people - all kinds of people; he knows about our lives in our real, everyday situations; he blesses people in a wonderful way. And not surprisingly, crowds are following him.

But what is surprising is that by the time we get to the end of Chapter 6 and the beginning of Chapter 7 in John's Gospel, which is just one-third of the way through the story, people are beginning to turn against Jesus. And so vehement is this turning against Jesus, that some of them want to put him to death. Some just lose interest; but some want to put him to death. And John's account moves on so rapidly that by the time we get halfway through his account (Ch.12), we're already into the last week of Jesus' life. And by the time we get to Chapter 13, just a little bit beyond halfway, we're in the last hours of Jesus' life. And before we know it, we come to the deadly conclusion where Jesus is hung up on a cross to die. And we're left to ask, "How in the world does this happen? How does this shift in public opinion happen so quickly with this wonderful man who touches and blesses lives; and then, so quickly, the whole thing is turned upside down. Why the meltdown?"

It's rather like some politicians' lives these days, isn't it - so quick, so sudden. Some juicy piece of news comes out and wham - the bright, shining star is gone. Or some faux pas is made, and the air goes out of the balloon. And we ask, "What in the world happened? Why this sudden change? What's the scoop? What brings Jesus down?"

Well, in our passage, in John, Chapter 7, there are two matters, two controversies which flow through this rather complicated passage. And they are floating through the crowd. They are the buzz of the day. And both of them are about authority. Both the controversies are about authority - (1) Biblical authority in the first place; and (2) personal authority in the second place. Biblical authority and personal authority. The matter of Biblical authority has to do with fitting

Jesus into the pages of the Bible, or at least the Bible of that day, which is our Old Testament. (The New Testament, about Jesus, is, of course, not yet written!).

The Bible of that day, our Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures, spoke about a person who would come and who would be a messiah, a king, a prophet, and who would impact the nation of Israel for good, bring them deliverance from all kinds of problems. And in different passages, things were said about this prophetic figure. The Book of Malachi, for example, the last book in the Old Testament, said that this figure would come suddenly, out of the blue. Nobody would know where he would come from. He would appear in the Temple (Mal. 3:3) - which, by the way, is exactly where Jesus is in John, Chapter 7. He would appear in the Temple, out of the blue, and nobody would know where he would come from. And yet on the other hand, according to the Book of the Prophet Micah, with which perhaps we're more familiar because we often read it at Christmastime - when the Messiah comes, he will be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:1).

So, according to the Old Testament, either we don't know where he's from, or he's born in Bethlehem! And the buzz in the crowd is to try to figure out how Jesus, this person before them in flesh and blood, fits into these prophecies - if indeed, he is the Messiah.

- So in Verse 27, the crowds say, "We know where this man is from. But when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from." That's the Malachi passage.
- Others say in Verse 41, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Don't the Scriptures say (this is Micah) that 'The Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived.'"

So they *sort of* know their facts. That is, they know Jesus is from Galilee (that's up north; Jerusalem and Bethlehem are in the south). Maybe they even know that he's from Nazareth. But they have no clue that he was actually born in Bethlehem, and that his birth fits perfectly with Micah's prophecy. Or that their ignorance - and this is John's sophistication in writing the story - or that their ignorance of the place where he was born, actually is a fulfillment of Malachi - "nobody knows where he's from." Indeed, they are blind to the fact that even as they share their ignorance of where he is from, Jesus suddenly appears in the Temple (even more of Malachi!)! But they miss it! They don't put the bits and the pieces together.

- Of course, most of the people who are struggling to put the pieces together with respect to Jesus, and who believe that Jesus probably does not fit the Old Testament puzzle, are not mad with him 'for failing the test, in their opinion' . . . rather, just confused (like a Sunday school class they're discussing the pros and the cons of Jesus fitting in with all these prophecies in Scripture. They're just discussing him. Not mad).
- But then there are some who are mad! There are some who actually hate him. Not just because he does not fit their understanding of what's involved in maintaining Biblical Authority (no doubt they too are asking how in the world Jesus fits the Old Testament picture). But they hate him because of their fears relating to personal authority - their authority, and Jesus' growing authority. This is what really and truly bothers them! And it leads to their anger and their hatred.

For example, as these folks are beginning to put the bits and pieces of Jesus' life together, like a puzzle, they're getting annoyed, really annoyed, at Jesus' constant claims about himself - his self-centeredness.

- Verse 28, Jesus says, “*I have not come on my own.*” Which begs the question, “Well, who sent you?”
- Verse 33, “*I am going to Him who sent me.*” What in the world does that mean?
- Verse 34, “*You will search for me but you will not find me. Where I am, you cannot come.*” You mean, God has sent you and we cannot go where God has you? Are you different from all of us?
- Or Verse 37, “*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me. And let the one who believes in me drink; as the Scriptures have said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’*” The scripture says this is a reference to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives (7:39), but it’s also an image which comes straight from the Garden of Eden - the River of God, giving life to everything flowing through the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10). And Jesus is saying that he is the source of that life - ‘me’ at the center, which leads them, and everyone, I suppose, to say, “At the least, this is sheer arrogance.” But as many have pointed out, if it’s not true, “it’s lunacy, as well.”

But it wasn’t just his words, his self-centered words that bothered them - but the buzz. The fact that he was becoming the center of attention. He was the one leading the discussion. He was the one dictating the terms of the discussion.

Every teacher knows, every politician knows, that if you’re going to remain in charge, you’re the one who needs to frame the discussion and the terms of the debate. But what they could feel was that that power was slipping out of their hands and moving in Jesus’ direction, so that all the discussion was around him - which meant that they were losing control of the situation, and he was gaining control of the situation.

And they realized this especially when the soldiers, the police they had sent to arrest Jesus, came back empty handed. At John 7:45, we read these words, that,

*“The Temple police went back to the Chief Priests and Pharisees, who asked them, ‘Why did you not arrest him?’” The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this.” Then the Pharisees replied, “Surely you have not been deceived, too, have you?”*

You see, they could feel it. They could feel it all slipping away from their control - their power, their authority, their sense of identity; who they were, their place in society. All of this was being subtly undermined by this person who comes out of the middle of nowhere and changes things, turning their world upside down and making them mad - making them angry. And they weren’t going to allow this to happen, without a fight.

Quite simply, at that point, the unthinkable begins to happen. Perhaps until that point, they’ve been really good religious folks. But they now know that the situation is at such a place where they’ve got to do something to stop this person. Even though he’s good; even though he’s wonderful; even though he’s a source of blessing to many, he does not seem to be to them. And that’s where the hatred and the anger and the death begins to creep in.

Some years ago, author Paul Little was on a college campus. He was talking to students about the claims of Jesus. And one student apparently was listening quite intently to all the debate going on, the questions and the answers. And Paul Little asked him this question (in *Know Why you Believe*, IVP, p.4). He said, “Have I answered all your questions?” And the

student said, “Yes, you have.” So Paul Little said, “So, are you going to become a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ?” To which the student replied, “No, I’m not.” And Paul Little was rather confused. He’d answered all the questions. But the student said “no I’m not”! So he said to the student, “Why not?” And he received an answer that was simple, remarkable, and brutally honest. The student replied, “Well, because if I become a Christian, it will mess up my life.”

He got it, actually! He understood! He understood that knowing about Jesus was not enough. Knowing about Jesus’ claims - check that off. “I know all about his claims.” Knowing that he fulfills all the prophecies, [indiscernible] authority is fulfilled by him. Check that off, “Know that.” He may have known that. But he knew, as well, that there was another kind of ‘knowing’ which was even more important. And that was knowing Jesus’ authority to mess up his life! He knew it, but he didn’t want it.

The experiencing of that authority is what it means, of course, to be a follower of Jesus Christ. But that is scary. That, to begin with, as the authorities knew and as this young man knew, is threatening. That, to begin with, is very uncomfortable, like going into surgery is uncomfortable! Something hard is going to happen before the healing takes place. And it is an act of faith to believe that healing will follow the cuts. The student didn’t believe that, nor did those who were threatened by Jesus when he entered their turf and began, as it were, to take over their territory.

Presbyterian author and Pastor Frederick Buechner actually takes us back to the Christmas story to describe this threatening nature of Jesus’ authority. He writes like this (*The Hungering Dark*, pp13-14).

“Those who believe in God can never, in a way, be sure of God again, once they have seen him in a stable. Once they have seen him in a stable, they can never be sure where God will appear, or to what lengths God will go, or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation God will descend in his wild pursuit of our lives. If the holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant’s child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound, but that holiness can be present there, too. And this means that we are actually never safe; that there is no place where we can hide from God; no place where we are safe from his power, to break into and re-create the human heart - to break into and re-create the human heart.”

Those who ended up hating Jesus, wanting to put him to death, got the picture, like the student. They got the picture. They rightly felt unsafe in Jesus’ presence, uncomfortable in his presence, threatened by his presence, by his personal authority. But they missed that last bit. They missed the best bit. They missed the glorious bit that when Jesus breaks our lives in two, he does so not to destroy us, but so that we will not end up destroying ourselves. He does so to re-create us in the image of God, for which we were made in the beginning and for all eternity. In fact, the Jesus in front of them, the Jesus standing in front of them there in the Temple, in fulfillment of that prophecy from Malachi, loved them so much that as Buechner says, he was actually willing to go to the “ludicrous depths of self-humiliation” embodied in his birth and in his death, in “the wild pursuit” of their lives - to re-create their hearts and their lives in the image of God, for all eternity, which is, of course, what he wants to do for all of us, as those folks I mentioned in the first six chapters discovered.

This is what he wants to do for all of us. And this is what is embodied in the silence of the table, which is here before us today, where Jesus speaks through the bread and through the cup, to each of us. And says, "I was broken for you. My blood was shed for you, so that your hearts would be broken enough by my love, that I might enter in and bring you my healing, so that you do not destroy yourselves; so that I can help refashion, reshape and re-create you for all eternity."

This is never comfortable. It always feels threatening. But it is, in fact, the first step towards good news, the best news that any person can ever receive. And it was for this that Christ came. "I came that you might have life," says Jesus, "and have it in all its abundance (John 10:10)."

May we allow His authority to give us this life now, and always.

Let us pray. "Holy God, we are amazed that you should humble yourself to enter our world, and place yourself at the mercy of human beings who thought this or that about you and then took you in hand and crucified you. May we have a sense of your power this day, and that you've come to us so that we will not remain as we are, but will be changed by you for good and for your glory. For our blessing now and always, hear this, our prayer. Amen."