

John 7:40-43

Know the Real Jesus

We've all heard the change in our society. More and more, in an effort to not offend, the month of December is filled with greetings of "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas". The argument goes that not everyone celebrates Christmas so "Happy Holidays" is more inclusive. Others counter by arguing that we're a Christian nation, and this is a war on our culture! Bring back the "Merry Christmases"!

I wonder though if that line of demarcation has any true value. Don't get me wrong, I love saying "Merry Christmas" as much as the next guy, but even if everyone in our world said Merry Christmas, what would we be left with? What do most people really mean when they say it? ? I know what I mean by saying it. I mean, "May the cheer you experience this year be filled with the true meaning of Christ. May you be gladdened as you realize the reason Jesus was born. May you see his cross and the sacrifice he made for you." Do you think that's what most people mean? Or is Merry Christmas just another way of saying, "Have a great time with family and friends", in other words, Happy Holidays? Even if people are willing to leave the name of Christ in the greeting, Christ is often still missing.

You see, sometimes we think that if we just get Jesus in the picture, then we've achieved something. But we're reminded this morning that having Jesus in the picture but having the wrong idea about him is about the same as not having him at all. We're reminded that many people do have Jesus in the picture but they can't agree on what he means. As we say good bye to another Christmas season and look into the New Year of blessings and challenges, let's make sure that we know who the real Jesus is so we might keep him not just in Christmas but in our hearts and our lives.

Today we lament that so many people only want the nice of Christianity; they don't want to hear about why Jesus came, especially if it includes their own sin. But this is nothing new. The very same problems were dividing the people of Jesus' day which what we encounter in the gospel for today.

To get the sense of what exactly divided the crowd we have to look at the words that were referred to in the gospel. It began, **After hearing his words some of the people said...** The words referred to here were the ones Jesus proclaimed on the last day of the Jewish year. This was the last day of the

great feast of tabernacles—a feast celebrated to commemorate the crossing of the desert and how the Lord provided for his people and brought them to the Promised Land. The ritual performed on this day saw the priest going to the pool of Siloah, just outside the temple, and drawing water. Then in solemn procession he would return to pour the water over the altar along with wine as a drink offering. This was to symbolize the way the Lord always quenched his people’s thirst...harkening back to the rock in the desert. That was when Jesus stood up and proclaimed, **If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. As the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from deep within the person who believes in me.** Jesus was making an unmistakable claim. If you have a thirst in your soul, I’m the one who can quench it. If you believe in me, you’ll receive spiritual life within you.

After hearing his words, some of the people said, “This is truly the Prophet.” Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Surely the Christ does not come from Galilee, does he? Doesn’t the Scripture say that the Christ comes from David’s descendants and from the little town of Bethlehem where David lived?” So the people were divided because of him.

What’s striking about this division among the people concerning Jesus is that everyone’s statements were somewhat true. The Prophet is a reference to Moses saying a prophet like him would come from among the people whom they were to listen to. That was talking about Jesus. The Christ, of course, is a Greek version of a Hebrew title, the Messiah. The anointed one of God. Jesus was that too. The Christ was to be born in Bethlehem as Micah prophesied (and Jesus was even if the people didn’t realize it). And those who correctly identified this Galilean as the Christ could point to Isaiah who said the light would shine in Galilee of the Gentiles. They all had some portion of the truth on their side.

The problem was what they thought these things meant when it came to Jesus. If the Prophet in the people’s mind was a second Moses, a second law bringer, a great teacher of morality, then that was an incomplete picture. If the Christ in their minds was the political savior so many expected him to be, then that was off too. If they were pointing to the Bethlehem prophecy to discredit the Galilean Jesus who was making these claims (as the following verses after our text suggest) then they were playing the pick and choose Scripture game. Pick and choose whatever portions defend the conclusion you’re trying to reach...we can dismiss Jesus and any claims he’s making.

They all had portions of the truth but the wrong picture of Jesus. I think it's important for us to ask why. The answer is sinful pride. Sinful pride that wants Jesus to be molded according to the longings of a sinful heart. Sinful pride which refuses to accept the sinfulness Jesus so clearly implied in his words about quenching their spiritual thirst...and which therefore refuses to see Jesus as the Savior from sin.

This is the same pride that wants to think of itself in terms of love and good will, peace and generosity. This pride wants to downplay sin to the point of saying that good people will go to heaven no matter what religion they practice. This is the pride that thinks Jesus only needs to be a new Moses, a moral teacher, someone who can modify behavior and show the path I can walk down to be good. Which is really all I need anyway. I don't need a Savior. Maybe just a life coach.

That same pride is also at the source of those who say, these claims of Jesus don't need to be taken seriously. He's a no one. He doesn't check the right boxes. Maybe a modern equivalent of the Galilee argument used here would be: these claims of Jesus don't need to be taken seriously because he's just a character coopted by the church which is trying to control us. This couldn't possibly be what God, if he even exists, would say or be like or accuse me of.

This is the pride that resides in the hearts of nice looking and nice sounding people and their Christmases might be really nice, but they refuse to see a need for the Lamb of God who was sacrificed for the sins of the world.

But, friends, this is not a pride that is found only outside the church. It can be found even in our own pews. Your pride-filled, sinful heart continues to want the right to sin without calling it sin. Your pride-filled, sinful heart and mine has a much stronger craving for acceptance than forgiveness. That's why many want a church that will accept them for who they are and won't judge them or call them to repentance.

You see, not everyone is thirsty and so not everyone is willing to know the real Jesus.

No doubt some of the Israelites who attended the feast of Tabernacles were Israelites who were just like aged Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph, devout and righteous people looking forward to the redemption of Israel—the forgiveness of their sins. These were people whose parents taught them about the God of redeeming grace. They attended the feasts and observed the Sabbath not just because God told them to—though this would have been

reason enough. They rejoiced in these opportunities because here they saw the righteousness of God. They saw a loving and forgiving God, who was gracious and compassionate who would keep showing them love and mercy. This faith made it possible for them to look at the prophet from Galilee and know that he was the Christ...correctly understanding that he had come to save them from their sins.

This is the real Jesus and faith in HIM is what the Christmas season is all about. Our Christmas isn't chiefly about happiness—it is about peace with God through Jesus Christ. We gather with family and friends to celebrate that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. While it is a celebration, it's also a time of humble acknowledgement of why Jesus came—to save his people from their sins. We have joy at Christmas time for the same reason we look forward to the solemn season of Lent. That gives way to the resurrection joy of Easter. Our Christmas joy is exactly the same reason we observe Ascension and the powerful season of Pentecost. Our whole year is predicated upon the good news that we have been freed of our guilt and shame through the Son of God who came to take away the sins of the world. Humble joy in our forgiveness unites us.

We by God's grace will not only keep the traditional Christmas greeting, we know the real Christ in Christmas...joy in our heart and in our celebration because God came to earth to be one of us that we might be like him—holy and righteous.

Others may not want to accept on the reality of sin even if there is a Christ who saves and turns mourning to gladness. But not us. Rather as we say good bye to Christmas and greet the blessings and challenges of the New Year, may we have a year in which our thirst for righteousness is continually quenched in the forgiveness we have in the real Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.