

Sermon #1,258: St. John 8:46-59 (Historic Gospel)
4-2-17, Lent 5, Bethany-Princeton MN
(Hymns: 276, 275, 306.1.3; comm. 270, 286, 301, 593)

GOD'S WORDS

Prayer: Lord, our God, You alone are able to cleanse from sin: Preserve us from appealing for righteousness to the testimony of our conscience or the innocence of our heart, and teach us to build our hope alone on the blood and death of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. For His sake blot out our sins and remember our transgressions no more. Amen. (Reading the Psalms With Luther, p. 229)

The Text, St. John 8:46-59 (v. 47). ⁴⁷ "He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God." Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who hears His Father's words and speaks them to you that you may believe and be glad: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

These words of Jesus put to rest the silly notion that Jesus did not know who He was. You hear so-called Bible scholars say that Jesus never claimed to be God and the Son of God; or that He was gradually figuring out who He was; even that He was deluded and fabricated this notion that He was the Son of God; or that His followers misunderstood Him and read into His statements things that He did not mean.

This is so obviously false, when we hear Jesus say to these Jews, "**Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I Am.**" But not only His words, also their reaction – to attempt to kill Him on the spot by stoning – also proves there was no misunderstanding Jesus' words. Jesus' enemies were waiting to hear Him claim to be God, so they could judge Him guilty of blasphemy, and in this case tried to punish Him for it instantly.

Jesus knew who He was. That truth is underlying this entire argument. It is the reason Jesus remains so calm in the face of such extreme hatred. The Jews opposing Him were driven by their hatred and their desire to provoke Him into a reaction to make such outlandish accusations, such as

that He is a Samaritan and even that He is possessed by a demon! All Jesus says is: **"I do not have a demon."** We would say, *Don't even respond to that charge! Don't dignify it with a response.* But He does respond, and so calmly and unemotionally, exactly because He knows who He is.

This is a contentious debate that takes up all of John 7 and 8. They hurl many hateful accusations at Jesus. Now He does not hold His tongue as He does in His Passion, when in His trial He is falsely accused and it says, **"He answered nothing."** It's not like that here, He does keep up His side of the discussion, but He never responds in anger, or trades insults. Even when Jesus says such things during this conversation as, **"you are of your father the devil ... the father of lies" (Jn 8:44)**, He isn't insulting them; He is dealing in facts and truth. They are lying and they know it.

This is about the Truth. It's the first thing we hear from Jesus: **"Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?"** Jesus is resting on speaking the truth. Then comes the verse that is at the heart and center of everything: **"He who is of God hears God's words. Therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God."**

This explains how Jesus knows who He is: by hearing God's words. This does not mean that Jesus as the Son of God had secret communication with God the Father, some divine illumination by which He received this knowledge. Certainly as true God He is omniscient, all-knowing. But when He became a true man He laid aside the full use of His power, glory, and even what He knows as God. In the days of His flesh He truthfully said that He did not even know the time of His second coming. We read that He had to grow in knowledge. He had to be taught.

This is a mystery to us, how this worked. We want to know when He knew the full truth about Himself as God. There are hints of it, when He was 12 and spoke of **"My Father's business,"** and in His first miracle when He spoke to Mary of **"My time [which] has not yet come."**

But I find it significant that His great statement about His nature as God, **"Before Abraham was, I Am,"** – that He has existed from eternity – comes so close to this statement: **"Whoever is of God hears God's words."** Jesus heard God's words. He heard them in the Scriptures, beginning in His childhood as Mary and Joseph taught Him.

In the words, **“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and He saw it, and was glad,”** Jesus makes reference to the Old Testament history, which He learned as a child. Can you picture Jesus as a child gladly hearing and learning the Scriptures? I think it’s important, as we see this acrimonious debate when He is surrounded by people stuck in seriousness. Notice that what He mentions, which they lack, is: joy.

Can you picture Jesus playing with the Scriptures? Enjoying and delighting in God’s words? So try to answer: When did Abraham rejoice? When did he see Jesus’ day? Was it in today’s Old Testament reading, the promise to Abram when he was 75 years old that he would have a son and through him *“all the families of the earth shall be blessed”*? Was it after Abraham waited for 25 years and Isaac, the promised son, was finally born as God promised? I think probably Jesus is referring to what we read in Genesis 22, when God told Abraham to sacrifice *“your son, your only son Isaac whom you love.”* How like God the Father these words sound in His love for His only Son! - *“This is My Son, whom I love.”* Jesus would read about how the Angel of the Lord turned aside Abraham’s knife from killing Isaac. I wonder how long it took for Jesus to understand that He was reading about Himself here. Who is the Angel of the Lord? The Bible texts make it clear this is God, who also was in the Pillar of Cloud and Pillar of Fire, and St. Paul says this *“was Christ!”*

As Jesus continued in the Scriptures He would see how everything in the Old Testament Scriptures pointed the knife at *“the lamb God will provide,”* as Abraham had told Isaac; this Lamb is Jesus! That is the center of the Old Testament. For all their concern over blasphemy and whether it was proper for Jesus to call God His Father and say that He is the I Am, the true eternal God; for all their hunger for the glory of Israel and a Messiah who would demonstrate power, the Old Testament preaches the Christ who is the Suffering Servant, the Lamb of God, the Sacrifice.

This time spent in the Scriptures is important. **“He who is of God hears God’s words.”** This is how Jesus knew who He was: from hearing God’s words. Only through His hearing of God’s words did the Holy Spirit give Him true knowledge of God, which includes knowledge that He is the one who came forth from God, sent by God to accomplish salvation. Jesus played in the Scriptures. He delighted and took joy in God’s words.

Why does this matter so much? Because Jesus came to be in the position we find ourselves in: tempted to be judged by other words than God's. Aren't words the form rejection usually takes? How you view yourself is often determined by words that are spoken to you or about you, and the way you speak of and to yourself. *You need to know who you are.*

The condemning words, the words of criticism and judgment, the words of blame, even the silent treatment that you get, or lack of encouraging words and words of praise, are just echoes of the voice of condemnation you hear in your conscience, the voice of the Law. The Law is, at its heart, words. These are God's words too, the Law words that condemn you for your sins. But they are not God's final word about who you are. The danger, when we build our self-image on the responses we get from other people, is that you take it as a lasting judgment, a rejection of you. You get the message that you are unimportant, you don't matter, you are not worth much. We're tempted to think more of these words and judging of other people than we are of God's words and judgments.

This is why hearing God's Word is so important, and why Jesus' example here is important. He knew who He was from His hearing of God's words. Jesus speaks of this to these Jews: **"I do not seek My own glory; there is One [the Father] who seeks My glory, and who judges. ... It is My Father who honors Me ... I do know Him and keep His word."**

In the earlier verses of this chapter – same conversation! – Jesus also said: *"He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him. ... I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him ... As My Father taught Me, I speak these things ... I speak what I have seen with My Father."*

Jesus hears His Father's words and speaks them to the world. He speaks them to you. You need His words. The emphasis on hearing God's Word is not a Law emphasis but a Gospel emphasis. This is specifically because of what Jesus did. He is the eternal Word. He is the Word made flesh. As He is rejected by His own in this dramatic fashion when they expel Him from the temple, and later He is crucified and killed, as He speaks forgiveness and mercy from the cross, not only is He the Word of the Father from eternity, but He is making God's words in the truest sense the Word that can only be understood in Him.

He has the words of eternal life. He says here, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps”** – holds onto – **“My word he shall never taste death.”** Why is this? Because after His death He rose again the third day. He is crucified and risen, and therefore His words are true. The Bible says that it was **“by the resurrection of the dead He was declared to be the Son of God” (Ro 1:4)**. His resurrection proves that all His words are true. How does He speak now? With His blood. His blood **“speaks better things than the blood of Abel” (He 12:24)**. He pleads for us with His blood.

So His words heal everything that the words of others hurt. His words justify you. His words say who you are. His words judge you righteous and innocent. His words say you are counted good in God’s sight for Jesus’ sake. His words say you are God’s own child whom He loves. His words say that you are acceptable to God and He takes pleasure in you. He delights in you. He never gives you the silent treatment. He never has scornful, scoffing, or disrespectful words for you. Only words of love.

That is all you need to hear. Not only that, His words create your reality. When Jesus’ words are spoken to you, the Spirit is at work in you, the Word is at work within you, to form a good conscience and connect you more closely to Jesus. Let Him hold onto you as you hold onto His word!

So whom are you going to listen to? Are you going to count the words of others, or of your guilty conscience, as being more important than His words? No way! You are of God, for you hear His words! His words say who you are:

My soul, be therefore of good cheer,
Though sinners threaten, scoff, and sneer,
Serenely on your way proceed,
Nor worldly strife and clamor heed,
For Jesus’ sake the cross you bear,
And soon with Him the crown shall wear. (ELH #418:6) Amen!