

I AM the Light of the World
John 8:12-20
John 11:9-10

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 8:12-20

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' Then the Pharisees said to him, 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.' Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.' Then they said to him, 'Where is your Father?' Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.' He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

John 11:9-10

Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.'

These days, the Pharisees' response to Jesus would fit right in on our talk shows and news interviews, wouldn't it? If you don't have an answer to what someone is saying, attack the person speaking. In fact, attack them even if you do have a response to what they are saying.

You see, if you were to engage with the content of what they are saying, then, by doing that, you would be acknowledging that they are a human being like you, and worthy of debating the issues with. If all you do is attack them, calling them names, attacking their integrity and their right to even talk, you are trying to pre-empt anything they might bring up, without any regard to whether what they said might be valid. You are refusing to talk about the issues that they are trying to talk about. You are trying to keep them too busy defending themselves and their own right to exist, to be able to talk about the issues.

This is a cheap debate tactic, one that a good debate coach would say is beneath the dignity of a high school sophomore. It signals that the person using it is not ready or not equipped to have a real discussion. It is the tactic that the Pharisees are using here.

But Jesus does not play that game. Only once in the gospels does he dismiss what someone has to say because they are not important enough to say it. At a time when he is exhausted, he insults the

Syrophoenician woman who comes to him for healing, but then he stops himself. He responds to her, and he heals her daughter.¹ He never insults someone to the exclusion of listening to what they say to him.

In our story today, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' accusations by telling them the truth, but not in a way that they understand it. Jesus tells them that he is the light of the world. He tells them that anyone who believes in him will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

This is a significant claim to those who know their Scriptures, as the Pharisees certainly do. Like all Hebrews at this time, they are waiting for and hoping for the Messiah. John was not the first to describe the coming Messiah in terms of light into darkness. Isaiah prophesied, in connection with the Messiah, that the people who walked in darkness would see a great light.²

The Pharisees are not prepared to discuss this. They are not equipped to debate about God, against God. So, they take the cheap road. They attack his testimony, asking where the other witnesses are.

Jesus responds that the Father is his other witness. This confuses them, and they ask, "Where is your father?" They don't say the Father, they say your father. They are not referring to God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. They are referring to Joseph ben Heli,³ creator of wooden furniture.

Why are the Pharisees doing this? You might get the impression from Scripture sometimes that the Pharisees were evil human beings, but most of them were far from it. The Pharisees lived among the ordinary people, and worked night and day to try to make the ordinary people of Judea holier and readier for the Messiah to come. They were known for their righteous actions and for studying the Law every night, trying to get every little bit of the essence out of it. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, the Pharisees were the leaders who figured out how the Jews could be Jews without the Temple. They became the rabbis of modern-day rabbinical Judaism.

¹ Mark 7:24-30.

² Isaiah 9:2.

³ Luke 3:23.

You remember Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to Jesus a few weeks ago. He realized that Jesus was doing miracles, and that he was teaching about God in a new way.

Nicodemus was faced with a choice.

He could preserve what he was used to, try to make everything the same as it was before Jesus' arrival. Pretend that the world had not changed. To do that he would have to get Jesus to shut up or go away.

Or he could listen to Jesus, and learn from him.

Nicodemus chose the second option. He asked Jesus questions, and he chewed on the answers. He argued with his colleagues in the Sanhedrin for giving Jesus a fair trial.⁴ And then, after Jesus' death, Nicodemus worked with Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus as properly as possible.⁵

Nicodemus made the choice to pay attention and to accept that perhaps God was doing a new thing. The majority of the Pharisees and the Hebrew leaders, though, were unfortunately not as brave as Nicodemus was. They refused to accept the possibility that God would do something new, until the Romans destroyed the Temple.

Because they were not open to the idea of God doing something new, and they were not able to successfully debate about God, against God, they didn't have a lot of options. They ended up using cheap debate tricks to try to get Jesus to shut up or go away. When that did not work, they used more cheap debate tricks and abused their authority to kill him.

What do we do, when we are confronted with new things, or with people who are saying things that don't fit with what we have heard before?

Like the Pharisees who confronted Jesus, we have a choice.

⁴ John 7.

⁵ John 19.

On the one hand, we can attack these people. We can call them stupid, or naive. We can claim that they must not have heard the Gospel, or understood it.

We can try to find reasons why we should not have to listen to them. We can assume that they are evil people, being dishonest. If that won't fly, we can look around for the evil person who is manipulating them or coaching them to say these things that we don't want to hear. We can cook up ridiculous conspiracy theories.

We can stick our fingers in our ears and say, "Nah-nah-nah, can't hear you!"

This is one option.

Sadly, the Church has taken this option far too many times, regarding slavery, and civil rights for other people, people whom we do not see or do not recognize among us.

We have free will, and no one can force you to listen to anyone if you really don't want to. But it doesn't sound much like the behavior that Jesus modelled for us, in showing us how to live as human beings and as children of God.

Or, there is another option.

We could calm our fears about what they might have to say, or at least put our fears aside until we've heard out people with new ideas or ones we don't understand.

We can refuse to oversimplify someone else's story for them, particularly before we've heard it. We can truly listen to what they have to say, and to the place where what they have to say comes from.

One of the things that we learn as we grow up is that other people may have different backgrounds than we do. And different upbringings. And very different experiences. That means that they may, no, they probably will, have a different perspective on what's happening around us. If people from a different background seem to have exactly the same perspective that we do, then we should be asking questions.

Someone having a different life experience than you do, and therefore a different perspective, is not an attack on you or on your life or on your life experience. It does not mean that your life experience

is invalid. It means that your experience does not cover the sum of all human experiences. None of ours do.

If you love someone, you will try to understand what they like and what they want, right? To do that, you need to try to understand where they are coming from. Your life experience is more complex than a label or something that will fit on a bumper sticker. So is his. So is hers. So are all of theirs. If you love someone, you will try to understand them.

You don't have to necessarily agree with them, but, if you love them, you will try to understand.

As Christians, we are commanded to love our neighbors. We are also commanded to love our enemies, which is convenient, considering how often they are the same people.⁶

What would happen in our national discourse if the most common immediate response to someone with a very different experience was not to attack that person's right to speak, or even their right to exist?

What would happen if that kind of a response was considered unacceptable in what some people call a Christian nation?

What would happen if people's immediate response was to try to understand?

What would happen if we as a nation acted more like Jesus and less like the people who killed him?

How would that change our country?

What would happen in our lives, if we genuinely tried to understand the people whom we meet who seem so different from us?

How would that change and enrich our lives?

⁶ Thank you, G. K. Chesterton.

If we were to do that, really do that, not just say we were doing it, we would see the beauty that God created in each of our brothers and sisters. We would see the image of God that is present even in the people with whom we disagree.

Now THAT would be seeing by the Light of the World.

AMEN.