

“The Call of Jesus”
John 12:44-50
June 7, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We return to the Gospel of John this morning – to the last section of chapter twelve.

And we are at a turning point of John’s Gospel here. In the first twelve chapters we get the public ministry of Jesus. Starting in chapter thirteen, the Gospel shifts its attention to the events of the passion week, and then the death and resurrection of Christ.

Our text this morning serves, in many ways, as a summary and concluding statement regarding Jesus’s public ministry. It gives us a summary of Jesus’s message, and the calling he extended in his ministry.

With that in mind, let’s hear now from John chapter twelve, beginning with verse forty-four.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

12:44 And Jesus cried out and said, “Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. 45 And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. 46 I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. 47 If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. 48 The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. 49 For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. 50 And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Righteous are you, O Lord,
and righteous are your rules.
You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness
and in all faithfulness.
Your promises are well tried,
and we, your servants, love them.
Though we be small and despised,
yet we do not forget your precepts.
Your righteousness is righteous forever,
and your word is true.
Even when we face trials,
your commandments are our delight.

Give us now understanding as we come to your word,
that we might here find life.

Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:137-138, 140-144]

In this passage we get a summary statement of Jesus's calling not only to those around him in his earthly ministry – but also his calling to us today.

Jesus cries out to those who hear his voice, and he calls them.

And this calling that goes out in many ways summarizes the significance of Jesus. And as it does, it confronts us with the reality that we have often underestimated Jesus's significance. And that's what I want us to consider together this morning: that Jesus's calling here summarizes his true significance for us, but we often tend to underestimate his significance.

And as we look at this passage we see four elements Jesus brings out, which help summarize his significance.

We see here:

- The significance of Jesus's coming,
- The significance of Jesus's dividing,
- The significance of Jesus's words,
- And the significance of Jesus's offer.

These are the four elements – the four angles – by which Jesus speaks about his significance. This morning I want to consider each one of them as they come up in this text – both what that significance is, and how we tend to underestimate it.

We start with the first: In this text we see the significance of Jesus's coming. And we see that in verses forty-four and forty-five. There we read: “And Jesus cried out and said, ‘Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.’”

Jesus speaks here about who he is and the fact that he has come. And these are two things that we are familiar with ... but which we often fail to hold onto and make significant in our lives in the ways that we should.

The first piece of it is who Jesus is.

And this is the piece that non-Christians tend to struggle with more. They tend to struggle less with the reality that Jesus really did walk the earth, and more with the question of who he really was.

But Jesus here tells us who he was and who he is. He tells us that whoever believes in him, believes in God the Father, who sent him. He tells us that whoever sees him, sees God the Father.

Now, there was a common Jewish maxim at the time that said, “One sent is as he who sent him.” But the claims of Jesus in this passage go well beyond that. [Carson, 452] He is not just claiming to be an ambassador for God. He is not just claiming to be a spokesperson for God. He is claiming

to identify with God – to have the same essence as God. To believe in Jesus is to believe in God. To see Jesus is to see God.

Now, maybe we want to chalk that up to an ancient or a spiritual way of speaking metaphorically, but before we do that, we need to consider Jesus in his actual historical setting.

Jesus was a Jew. And he knew the Jewish Scriptures – the Hebrew Scriptures. And those he spoke to knew the Hebrew Scriptures. And the Hebrew Scriptures are *filled* with people sent by God – people sent to be his ambassadors, people sent to be his spokespersons, people sent to be his representatives: prophets, priests, deliverers, kings, and so on. The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with people sent by God to his people ... but none of them ever said anything like this. None of them said, “To believe in me is to believe in God.” None of them ever said, “To see me is to see God.” In all the history of Israel, there’s nothing like that from those that God sends.

Jesus is claiming to be something greater – something much more than any of those who came before him. Jesus is claiming to be one with God the Father in a way like no one that Israel had ever seen before. Jesus is claiming to be God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, one in substance with God the Father. Jesus is claiming to be God himself, come to earth.

That’s the claim. Now you can believe him or disbelieve him – I urge you to believe him – but while you can believe him or disbelieve him, one thing you can’t do is to reduce him to being a mere messenger or teacher. He won’t let you. He either is God himself, or he is a deceiver, or he is mentally unhinged. Those are our choices. We cannot make him merely a wise sage. His claims about himself won’t let us do that.

As one commentator puts it: “Jesus is not a figure of independent greatness; he is the Word of God, or he is nothing at all.” [Barrett, quoted in Morris, 609]

And so, as we consider the significance of Jesus’s coming, the first piece of that that we need to recognize is *who* it is who came: It is God the Son – eternally one with the Father – God incarnate, who came to earth. That’s the first piece.

The second piece is the fact that he really did come.

And I think that this is the piece that Christians tend to struggle with more.

We don’t struggle with it in our statements of faith or in what we would claim to believe – nothing like that. But I think that in the way we think about God, and think about our own lives, and think about the extent to which those two things connect – I think on that level, we struggle to hold on to the fact and the significance that Jesus, God the Son, really did come here to this earth.

We can often struggle with a tendency to think of God as distant from us. We can think of him as far off. Or we can think of him as cold or emotionally disconnected from us. Or we can think of him as irrelevant to and unconcerned with the details of day-to-day human life that we need to spend so much of our time dealing with.

But if we really believed and we really saw the significance of the fact that Jesus, God the Son, truly came to this earth, then I think we would not struggle with those feelings like we do.

God – the true God – the God of the Bible – is not a God who stays far off from his people. Again and again we see him draw close to them in the Scriptures. But we see it nowhere more clearly than in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God literally walked among his people. He took onto himself their pain. He reached out and touched them. He ate with them and drank with them. And though Christ has now returned to heaven, he tells us that he is still with us by the Holy Spirit. And that is not just a warm sentiment, it's not just a nice thought – it is a hard fact about what God is like. If in seeing Jesus we see God the Father, then we know that our God is not a God who will stand far off from us. He is a God who comes close to his people. We know he is not a God who is emotionally distant from us, because Jesus was not emotionally distant from those around him. We know he is a God who cares about the mundane every-day details of life, because Jesus lived his life in mundane every-day details. He had to deal with them just as we do – he understands them and he understands us when we speak to him about them. He knows what it's like to feel tired. He knows what it's like to feel run down. He knows what it's like to lament, or to feel betrayed, or disappointed, or to face physical, emotional, or spiritual hardships.

Jesus reveals to us the God who draws close to his people and their struggles, and if we ever doubt that, we just need to turn back to the Gospels and read it there again.

But in his coming we not only see God's closeness; we also see his love. For that is why he came.

As one commentator puts it: “[Jesus] has come because God loved the world so much that he didn't send a lowly subordinate; he didn't send a long-distance message; he didn't leave a note in the hope that someone would find it. He loved the world so much that he came in person, in the person of his own son, the Word made flesh, so that he could save the world in person. That was and is what Jesus is all about.” [Wright, 40]

As Jesus summarizes his significance for us here in this text, the first element brought out is the significance of his coming. Jesus has come as God the Son, revealing to us God the Father. Jesus has come to draw close to us in love, because that is the kind of God he is.

That is the first thing we see.

The second thing we see is the significance of Jesus's dividing.

The second thing Jesus brings out is that as he comes, he divides – he brings division. We get that in verse forty-six. There we read: “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”

Now, on one level, Jesus is of course speaking here of his saving work – his work of drawing us from darkness and into light – of what he offers to us, the invitation of salvation that he extends to us. And we will talk more about that as we think about verses forty-nine and fifty.

But there is a second element of this we need to recognize as well. And it's the fact that Jesus brings a division into humanity. It is the divide between those who have trusted in Christ and are following him, and those who have chosen to remain in darkness.

This spiritual divide between light and darkness is the deepest division in the universe. It is the divide between all spiritual beings. It is the divide between all humanity. [Wright, 39-40]

Now ... that's an odd statement to make right now, because it seems a little underwhelming. I mean, if there is anything that we feel right now it is that humanity is filled with divisions. We live in a time that feels highly fractured.

Look at our country. We are a country that is deeply divided. We are divided over politics. We are divided by region. We are divided by race. We are divided by even the question of how much we are divided by race. We are divided by class. We are divided by worldview. We are even divided over a global pandemic. We are a highly divided people.

And so, when Jesus comes and introduces more division, maybe there's part of you that wants to say: "Ok, fine – whatever. Go ahead and add one more – what's the difference?"

But the division Jesus brings is both the deepest division, and it is the solution to all other divisions.

First, it is the deepest division there is. Many of the divisions in the world around us – not all of them, to be sure – but many, can be reduced to the same basic dynamic.

Since the fall of our first parents, human beings have sinned against and divided from and torn down one another, all in a sinful and foolish attempt to push ourselves up by pushing others down.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God, the very next thing that happened was division, as Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent and both tried to excuse themselves by pushing blame onto another. And it has continued ever since. Humans have used any means possible to push down and exploit other human beings in an attempt to elevate themselves in the process. Sometimes it is overt. Sometimes it is subtle. But it has always been there. We see it in our children when they try to tear a sibling down so that they can feel better about themselves. We see it in our own hearts when we wish for others to fail, so that we can feel superior to them. We see it in our schools when healthy competition turns into vicious backbiting. We see it in our places of employment when mutually beneficial relationships between employer and employee are turned into a battle where each tries to manipulate or outmaneuver the other. We see it in politics when civil disagreement turns into hateful denunciations. We see it in the sexual exploitation of pornography that delights in objectification and degradation. We see it in economic systems that try to exploit those who are most vulnerable. We see it in international settings when one country tries to use or abuse another. We see it in the smug snobbery of classism. We see it in the disregard and the degradation of racism.

This is the condition that humanity has put itself into – this is just one aspect of the darkness among many.

But we are reminded here that Jesus has brought the light. And with it, a deeper divide. The divide can be characterized in many ways. At its heart it is the divide between those at peace with God, and those at war with God. But along with that it can also be described by how we relate to everyone else. Because part of the call – part of what it means to be called to the light – is to be called away from that war for advantage and dominance against others.

We are not only called to stop pressing others down, but we have no need to press others down because of what we have in Christ. In Christ we have our sins forgiven, so we need not blame others for what is wrong with the world. We can own our own contributions to the brokenness of

this world. In Christ we are lifted up, and honored by God, for Christ's sake, and so we need no longer try to elevate ourselves by pushing others down.

Because these things are true, those who follow Christ are not only supposed to be those who dwell in the light, but those who become a light themselves.

In Matthew chapter five Jesus says to those who follow him: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Reflecting on Matthew five and John twelve, Augustine notes: "All the saints, therefore, are lights, but they are illuminated by [Christ] through faith." [LIV.4]

Jesus calls us to cease our warfare aimed at putting ourselves above others, and he calls us instead to work for his kingdom. He calls us instead to be those who work for peace and for justice and for dignity. He calls us to live as God our Maker has called us to live. He calls us to be his instruments, working to make the structures of society to be in harmony with God's justice, goodness, and truth – whether in the area of human sexuality, economics, family life, workplace practices, politics, class relations, or race relations.

Christians are called in each area to be a light – a light reflecting the light of Christ – owning their own contribution to the trouble of this world, and working, as an extension of their allegiance to Christ, to bring peace and justice.

The divides in this world are real, and they are painful, and a lot of sin has made them deeper over years or even centuries, in some cases.

But the divide that is even greater, cut through humanity, is between those who have aligned themselves with Christ's work to make all things new, and those who will continue the worldly battles for personal position.

Jesus calls us to the light ... but how does he call us?

That brings us to our third point.

Jesus has come to us as God the Son. He comes making a great division through humanity. He calls us, in that great division, out of the darkness and into the light. And the way he calls us is by his word.

That is the third element in this passage that we must see and must appreciate – the significance of Jesus's words.

We get that in verses forty-seven and forty-eight. There we read Jesus say: "If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day."

Here we have a startling statement. Jesus comes and he calls us out of darkness and into light. He calls us out of enmity with God and into peace with God. He calls us out of hate and exploitation of our neighbors and to a place of love for our neighbors. He calls us to cross that great divide, from darkness to light, and he calls us to that by his word.

Which means that how we respond to Jesus's word is key. Some will hear him and respond by coming to the light. But some will hear him and respond by choosing to remain in the darkness.

What did this mean for those Jesus was speaking to here, and what does it mean for us now?

Well, for those Jesus spoke to in his earthly ministry, it meant that they had seen his deeds and they had heard his words, and they were therefore without excuse.

When Jesus says he will not judge them, but his words will, he does not mean that he will not judge them at all – we know elsewhere that he says that he will do just that. No – what he means is that judgment will not come to them arbitrarily from some foreign source, but they will bring judgment on themselves based on how they responded to the knowledge they have.

Those Jesus spoke to knew a lot. But many still chose to turn away from Jesus's call and to stay in the darkness – to stay in the perpetual battle to justify themselves, ignoring God and using other people. Jesus says that they did not lack information. They did not lack data. At the level of the heart, they knew what they were doing, even if they didn't want to admit it to themselves. And so, at the last day, when they stand before God and are judged, they will be judged by what they knew, but failed to respond to. Their judgment will be great. And their judgment will be just.

That makes sense for those who saw and heard Jesus directly. But what about us? What about you and me?

Well, the Apostle Paul answers that question in the first two chapters of his letter to the Romans. And he gives three answers there. First, he says that creation itself testifies to all about who God is. When we fail to see what creation tells us about God, it is not a lack of information or intelligence that blinds us – but it is the same willful desire for the darkness that blinded those who heard and saw Jesus directly.

Paul writes: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [...] they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” [Romans 1:18-21, 25]

So first, God's word – his revelation – comes to us in creation.

But second, it comes to us through our conscience. And Paul has a clever way of pointing this out, because he knows our conscience can be pretty weak when it comes to ourselves. But it's often quite strong when it comes to other people. We may overlook our own failures and come up with convoluted ethical maneuvers when it comes to ourselves, but we are moral realists when we look

at other people. And every time we make a moral judgment about someone else, Paul says that we reveal that in our hearts we know right from wrong – good from evil. We therefore know both how God wants us to live, and we know what God himself is like. [Romans 2:1-16]

But third, Paul says that we will also be judged by what we have heard of the Scriptures. [Romans 2:17-24] The Scriptures, we are told, are the word of God, just as the words of Jesus when he was on earth were the words of God. We may feel far separated from those who heard Jesus's words from his own lips to their own ears, but the Bible tells us that if we have the Scriptures we have heard the word of God.

And so, in all these ways, we have received – we have heard the word of Jesus. And it calls us to the light – it calls us to follow Jesus, God the Son, who came to us from the Father.

And if we don't, we will be judged by what we know. And each of us knows much. There will be no lack of grounds for that judgment.

What does that mean for each of us?

Well, if you are not a Christian, it means that you need to take seriously what you know of Christ, and you need to respond.

The time for delay is over. The time of ignoring the light and clinging to the darkness needs to come to an end. You need to confront head-on the question of how you will respond to Jesus.

As one commentator puts it, you need to ask yourself: "What if Jesus really were the mouthpiece of the living God? What if seeing him really did mean seeing the Father? What if hearing his words and not believing them really did mean having those words return as judges in the end?" [Wright, 41]

Consider those questions. And then come to Christ in faith – step out of the darkness and into the light of Christ.

These verses apply to non-Christians, but they don't only apply to non-Christians. Jesus's words were not just for those who had openly rejected him and had no faith in him – they were also for those around him who had superficial faith. And that should cause Christians to stop and reflect as well. [Carson, 452]

Perhaps you are tuned in this morning. And perhaps you have been a part of the church for a while. Perhaps you have heard many sermons. Perhaps you have heard the word of God again and again – but the truth is that you have not embraced Christ from the heart.

If that is you, then first, this passage reminds you that you will be judged by what you knew in this life. This morning, and many other mornings, you have heard the word of God. In your heart, you know what you are doing by remaining in the darkness.

Jesus, in this passage, this morning, calls you to abandon the darkness and come to the light. He calls you to forsake your sin and your attempts at self-justification, and come to him. He calls you to heed his word, and repent.

There are non-Christians, there are those in the church, who have only superficial faith; but there are also those who have true faith, but who have made peace with at least some aspects of the darkness.

In some sense this is true of every Christian – we all have areas where we still live according to the patterns of darkness. And so our text this morning calls us to bring every area of our lives into the light, by heeding *all* of God’s word to us.

For we who trust in Christ will face a judgment as well. We are saved by grace – that is true, and we will speak about that in a minute. But even if we are saved, we will also answer for our actions and our inaction in this life. And in those cases, the word that we heard, but failed to act on, will stand as our judge.

We all have parts of Christ’s word to us that we prefer to ignore. The husband or wife who knows that how they speak to their spouse should be a picture of how Christ and the Church speak to one another ... but instead they speak harshly, or dismissively, or degradingly, or cruelly ... over and over again. The child who knows the honor they owe their parents but chooses dishonor and disrespect instead. The unmarried Christian couple who knows what the Bible says about God’s calling for sex, but decides to do what is best in their own eyes instead. The Christian who knows the kind of employer or employee God calls them to be, but chooses to ignore that, in order to grasp at more for themselves. The Christian who knows that the Bible says that sin shapes every part of the world around us ... but then tends to pick and choose to only see sin where they want to see it – which is usually in other people. Sin is everywhere, they agree ... but it’s not really an issue for my gender – just the other one. Total depravity is real ... but it’s not so much a problem for my socioeconomic class as the other ones ... it’s not so much an issue for my race as for other races ... it’s not at work in my institutions, just other people’s institutions.

If we have heard God’s word, then we should know better. We do know better. We know what the Bible says about the pervasiveness of sin. We know what it says about our calling to obey God’s word in our personal lives. We know what it says about acknowledging and opposing sin and injustice in the world around us. But often we turn a blind eye. We suppress what we know to be true. But the word we have heard and ignored will be our judge.

We see in this passage the significance of Jesus’s coming. We see the significance of the division he makes. We see the significance of the word he gives us.

The final thing Jesus brings out here is the significance of his offer.

Jesus calls us to see who he is – that is true. He calls us to heed his word, and step out of the darkness and into his light – out of the darkness of our sin and into the light of his truth; out of the darkness of our denial of God, and into the light of knowing our Maker; out of the darkness of denying the sin in us and around us, and into the light of seeing it for what it is; out of the darkness of using those around us, and into the light of being peacemakers of Christ’s kingdom. All of that is true.

But it’s not actually the central thing Jesus offers us here. That comes in verses forty-nine and fifty.

In verses forty-nine and fifty we read Jesus say: “For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”

This is crucial. Because Jesus brings us many things, and he calls us to many things. But they are not the heart of what Jesus brings us and calls us to. The heart of what Jesus offers us *is* eternal life. The heart of what Jesus commands us to do is to trust in him and cling to him, which *is* eternal life.

And that is important. Note Jesus’s words. He doesn’t say that the commandment *leads to* eternal life – as if it is a list of tasks that must be completed in order to get eternal life. He says that the command *is* eternal life. [Morris, 609]

Jesus therefore is not talking about the list of ways he calls us to love God and love our neighbor – as important as those things are. No – what he’s talking about instead is the central calling to come to him and cling to him by faith, which *is* eternal life.

That is the thing Jesus came to offer. That is the thing Jesus came to accomplish.

What we have here in our text is a “tender appeal” from Jesus, because, as one commentator puts it, Jesus “came to deliver men from darkness, not to imprison them in it.” [Morris, 607, 608]

Jesus came – but he did not just come to reveal the Father to us, he came to bring us to the Father, and secure our peace with the Father, which *is* eternal life. Jesus came to separate spiritual light from spiritual darkness, but he did not leave us on our own to jumping across that chasm. He has laid down his life on the cross as a bridge for us, from the darkness to the light, and as we trust in him he carries us over it, as we cling to him by faith, which *is* eternal life. Jesus gives us his word and he calls us to live as the light of the world – to honor him and to love those around us in all we do, rather than honoring ourselves and using those around us. But even as he issues those commands, he does not merely lay out a law and step back to see how we will perform. He offers us life in him. And as we accept that life from him, he strengthens and enables us to pursue righteousness and the ways of the light. If we will admit our need and accept his grace, then he will make us secure in him, so that we can admit the ways we have sinned. He will increase our love for him so that we will strive to turn from our sin. He will open our eyes to the brokenness around us and strengthen us to be peacemakers who can face the troubles around us without self-defensiveness, but with an honest assessment of the sin in us and around us. And while he will call us to work for righteousness in our own hearts and in the world around us, he will remind us again and again that we are merely his servants in the effort – and he can accomplish in us and through us what we never could accomplish on our own. And that *is* eternal life.

Central to all of this is what Christ offers us in the gospel: eternal life that is not just far off in the future, but begins now, as we cling to Christ by faith, have peace with God our Father, receive forgiveness for our sins, and live our lives now in the light.

In all these ways we see the significance of Jesus.

Jesus calls on those around him to see it at the end of his earthly ministry. And he calls on us to see it this morning.

See the significance of the fact that he came – there is no greater event in human history than the fact that God the Son, came to this world, in the flesh, to save you and to make this world new.

See the significance of the division Christ cuts through humanity. There is no greater question in your life than which side of that line you will be on: the side of the light, or the side of spiritual darkness.

See the significance of the word Christ has spoken to you, in creation, in the way he has formed your conscience and your soul, and in his written word. There is no word, no information, no communication to you from anyone else that is greater or more important than that.

See the significance of the offer Christ has set before you: to cling to him by faith and live both now and for eternity at peace and in joyful union with God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This morning Christ calls you. This morning Christ cries out to you. Hear him and respond.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Augustine. *Homilies on the Gospel of John*. Tractate LIV. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First Series, Volume 7.

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