The Gospel of John: *The Divider*
John 7:40-52

This morning we will return once again to the 7th chapter of John, vss. 40-52.

40 When they heard these words, some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet.” 41 Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee? 42 Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” 43 So there was a division among the people over him. 44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. 45 The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why did you not bring him?” 46 The officers answered, “No one ever spoke like this man!” 47 The Pharisees answered them, “Have you also been deceived? 48 Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.” 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51 “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” 52 They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.”

My message this morning is entitled, *The Divider*, and it will fall under four subheadings: 1) Jesus the Divider; 2) An Honest Observation; 3) Intellectual Snobbery; and 4) Intellectual Integrity.

**I. Jesus the Divider**

If you happened to miss last Sunday’s message, our text today will make little sense without some recapping. The action here in chapter 7 takes place in Jerusalem at the very end of the Feast of Tabernacles. On the last and great day of the festival known as Hoshana Rabbah, at a very climactic moment when a temple priest was pouring out water onto the altar and thousands were singing, praying, and circling the altar with palm branches and willow branches in a traditional ceremony that was essentially asking God to send rain upon the earth…Jesus stood up and cried, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” It was a defining moment in Jesus’ public ministry. Hundreds, if not thousands of people heard Jesus offer Himself as the satisfaction for the universal condition of “thirst.”

Naturally, such a claim led to a variety of responses from those who heard what Jesus said.

John writes beginning with vs. 40 and describes one common response among the crowds in the temple: When they heard these words, some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet.” We’ve touched on this before, but it bears repeating: there were three main “people” that the Jews were looking for due to the promises of scripture: the Prophet like Moses, Elijah (or one like Elijah), and the Messiah. The prophecy regarding the Prophet (like Moses) is found in Deut. 18:18 when God says to Moses:

I will raise up for (Israel) a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

So, here in vs. 40, we find that a group of people who heard Jesus in the Temple immediately discern “This really is the Prophet.” They rightly see Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Another group of people is willing to go one step further, as John reports in vs. 41: “Others said, ‘This is the Christ.’” For some who heard Jesus, there can be no doubt: Jesus is the Messiah, or
in the Greek, “the Christos.” Jesus is the promised One, the anointed One…the Deliverer of all Israel. No doubt many saw Jesus as the Messiah as He cried out for the thirsty to come to Him and drink on that dramatic day of Hoshana Rabbah, likely during or shortly after the final prayer that features a Messianic poem.

We get the sense that those who thought of Jesus as “the Prophet” might have been inclined to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but there was a problem that is articulated in vs. 41-42: “But some said, ‘Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?’”

We must remember that the citizens in Jerusalem on this occasion who are posing this question would have not known that Jesus was actually born in Bethlehem. All they knew was that Jesus hailed from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, so many of the crowd there in Jerusalem rejected Jesus as the possible Messiah because they believed He did not meet the prophetic prediction of Micah 5:2, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” John the Apostle, of course, would have known that Jesus was born in Bethlehem; and even many of those reading the Gospel of John for the first time would have known of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke’s gospels that tell of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem. So, there is a bit of humor and irony here as John reports the crowd’s concerns about where Jesus “came from,” all the while knowing that the city of Jesus’ birth perfectly fulfilled the prophecy from Micah. More important to John, however, was that Jesus came from GOD, and that is clearly emphasized in the Prologue as we learned in John 1.

A key observation is what John states next in vs. 43, “So there was a division among the people over him.” Church, right from the start, people have been divided over Jesus, and that should come as no surprise. Jesus said in Luke 12:51, 52: Do you think I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three.” In Matthew 10:34,35 Jesus said,

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

Jesus knew that in a world covered up with sin, His presence would create division. For those comfortably entrenched in their sin, Jesus was offensive and even considered a threat. Such is why we read in vs. 44, “Some of them wanted to arrest him…” Such is the case to this day. Bring up Jesus in any public square conversation, and half the people in the room will want to “arrest” the conversation…they will want to stop any mention of His name. But then there will be others who hear Jesus, and they rally around Him…they refuse to allow Jesus and His message to be “arrested”…and thus the dividing nature of Jesus and His movement continues to this day.

Now, let me ask you a question? Does this bother you? Does it bother you that Jesus causes division? At first blush, we might be tempted to lament that Jesus creates division. After all, we all want to live in a world of peace, right? We want to live in harmony with everyone…we want to believe in a utopian world where everyone is nice, everyone gets along, and there is no
“division.” Right now, in my own family of origin, the greatest division among us is Jesus. My younger brother and his wife do not share our faith in Jesus, and they have made it clear that we are not to even mention His name in their presence. My brother has made it clear that he will disassociate from us completely if we even bring up the subject. I know our situation is common among many families, and this division is painful.

Many of us have been taught that if not for religion…if not for those darn Christians, the world would get along fine, and sometimes that’s the way it feels even in our own families, right? We have been taught that it’s those crazy people who believe in God who cause all the wars. Many of our teenagers and college students still believe to this day that if we could only do away with religions, if we would set aside our faith in Jesus and our belief in heaven and hell, all the world would live at peace. This was the dream of John Lennon, the famous lead singer of the Beatles who penned that famous song, “Imagine.” Here are the lyrics to that popular and beautiful song:

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people living for today

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people living life in peace, you

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope some day you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world,

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope some day you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Everybody loves this song…it’s so lyrical and beautiful and it makes us long for a utopian world of peace and the brotherhood of man, right? By the way, this song was, and is still to some degree, the dream of Marxist Communism: an atheistic state without private ownership of possessions where everyone shares everything for the common good…for the brotherhood of man. So how did the great experiment of Communism work out? Study your history and here’s what you will find: atheistic Communism led to the single greatest slaughter of human beings the world has ever seen in Communist China, Communist Romania, Communist North Korea, and Communist Soviet Union. You see, it turns out that a godless society quickly dissolves into totalitarianism where the strong prey upon the weak and the powerless. That is what the 20th
century taught us in no uncertain terms. All the virtues of sharing, compassion, brotherhood, and shalom belong to God; and apart from God and our accountability to God’s law and judgments, those virtues mean nothing. People in power always appeal to a utopian vision of peace and prosperity, but in a god-less society that vision is always dependent upon the powerful person’s personal version of peace and prosperity. Should the peace and prosperity of the powerful be threatened, the outcome is all too predictable…and deadly. Now…to be fair, there have been totalitarian rulers in the past 2000 years who claimed to be “Christian” and committed horrible atrocities “in God’s name.” But this is, again, exactly why we need Jesus the Divider.

Jesus the Divider reveals what is true and what is false; what is pure and what is defiled; who is genuine and who is a fraud; who is a sheep, and who is a goat! As Dr. Kent Hughes observes, “Jesus is the Continental Divide in our lives.” When we are confronted with Jesus and what He said, we fall to one side or the other…there is no safe, neutral place to stand. Jesus brings division because He is the Truth, and the presence of truth reveals falsehood. Jesus brings division because He is the Light, and those who love darkness hate the Light. Jesus brings division because He is Love, and His perfect love reveals all that is unloving.

So, let us resist the utopian dreams of godless Communism just because we like the Beatles! Wake up Church! Study your history and let us acknowledge the facts of the matter: we are a world covered up in sin. Injustice, hatred, and violence do not mysteriously disappear from uninviting God into our society…it is just opposite. History doesn’t lie: no heaven, no hell, no God above, and no Jesus leads to a ruthless totalitarianism, hopelessness, and a society where the value of human life is diminished. Left to our best human efforts apart from God’s law, and those in power will enslave, brutalize, ostracize, marginalize, and genocide without a second thought in order to ensure their personal version of peace and prosperity! All the world desperately needs Jesus the Divider to discern what is true and what is false. We need Jesus the Divider in order to see our own sin and repent; we need Jesus the Divider to discern true virtue from populist propaganda; and we need Jesus the Divider that we might receive God’s forgiveness and salvation from the punishment we all deserve. Do not lament the division that comes in Jesus’ name…it is a division that is necessary for the salvation of the world, including our own souls, amen?

My heart has been wrecked this week by the senseless death of George Floyd. Once again, a white police officer killed a black man by kneeling on his neck for 7 minutes, and the whole episode was caught on video. Riots ensued in Minneapolis, and social media exploded with all kinds of vitriol. Once again my black brothers and sisters are crying out, “How long? How long will this injustice be perpetuated by those in power?” Once again my white brothers and sisters are feeling attacked as though all white people enjoy and agree with killing black people…and here we go again.

Church, can we all agree that racism and police brutality are wrong? I think we can agree with that. But let me ask you a question: how do we know racism and police brutality is wrong? How do we know racism and prejudice and the abuse of power is wrong? We know these things are wrong because of the light of God’s immutable moral law. We know because that moral law has been written upon the hearts of men. We know because God’s Word reveals that all men were created in God’s image and that makes all people irreplaceable and of great value to our Creator,
and by extension, to those who love the Creator. But over time...we forget, don’t we. We become conditioned to social injustice if it does not immediately affect our comfort and wellbeing. We forget the sting of prejudice and oppression if we are not those who are directly influenced.

Church...we need Jesus the Divider. We need God’s immutable law and the Light of the World to see our sin and to repent. We need Jesus the Divider to bring conviction about our role and our contribution to evil...even if it is a passive contribution. We need Jesus the Divider to break our hearts about the evil in ourselves and the evil all around us...but we also need Jesus the Healer, amen? For not only does Jesus bring division where we most need division, but only Jesus brings healing and reconciliation for those who will confess their sin, repent, and call upon His name for the forgiveness of sins. Only Jesus can heal those wounds that seem impossible to heal. Take Jesus out the equation, take God’s law and God’s mercy out of our society, and the strong will always prey upon the weak, the powerful will always oppress the powerless...and there will be no hope for forgiveness and reconciliation. Friends...we all need Jesus, amen?

Before I move on, I want to invite you to hang out with me after the service during the Q and A time. I’ve invited our own Pastor Greg Ealey to join me, and we will be responding further to the George Floyd tragedy and discussing in greater length Colonial’s commitment to racial justice and reconciliation. I hope you’ll stick around and join us.

Let us turn now to my second subheading:

II. An Honest Observation

If you recall, back in vs. 32 John reported that the chief priests and the Pharisees sent officers to arrest Jesus. Now, having gone to the temple and seen Jesus firsthand, John reports of their return in vs. 45: “The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why did you not bring him?” The officers answered, “No one ever spoke like this man!”

Notice the honest observation of these officers who were assigned to arrest Jesus. These men were not sophisticated theologians, they were not professional clergy...they were working men who had no bone to pick with Jesus. Their assignment was simple: go and arrest this Jesus of Nazareth and bring Him back to the Sanhedrin. However, when the temple guards arrived on the scene to arrest Jesus, they were so moved by His words, they were so taken by His teaching, that they returned empty-handed. They made no excuses for failing to fulfill their assignment. All they could think to say was, “No one ever spoke like this man!” NT scholar Arthur Pink writes, “What a testimony was this from unbelievers! Instead of arresting Him, they had been arrested by what they had heard!”

Church, no one ever spoke like Jesus, and here’s why: Jesus always spoke the truth...always. Everything that Jesus said was true. Who else could make such a claim? Who among us has never lied or at least stretched the truth? No one ever spoke like Jesus, and if you find that hard to believe, then I know you haven’t actually read all that Jesus said. So many people dismiss Jesus from a distance having never considered what Jesus actually said. The Words of Jesus, change lives. His Words cut to the heart. His Words create a picture of the world that is true on
a universal level in all times and places. His Words reveal the realities of the unseen, spiritual realm that is always all around us; and His Words reveal the predicament and the cure for our sin-sick souls. You may not always like what Jesus says; you may not always agree with what Jesus says; but no one could make a case against the simple, honest observation of these officials: No one ever spoke like this man! The real question is: will we give a fair hearing to what Jesus actually said? That leads me to my third subheading:

III. Intellectual Snobbery

Needless to say, the Pharisees are not at all pleased with the temple guard who return empty handed; but they are flat out furious when the soldiers observe the brilliance of Jesus and His teaching. The Pharisees respond in vs. 47, “Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.”

If you were ever looking for a picture to define the word “contempt,” this is it! William Barclay recalls the attitude of the Pharisees toward the crowd, the common people, spoken of here by the Pharisees. He writes:

The Pharisees had a phrase by which they described the ordinary, simple people who did not observe the thousands of regulations of the ceremonial law. They called them the People of the Land; to them they were beneath contempt. To marry a daughter to one of them was like exposing her bound and helpless to a beast. The rabbinic law said, “Six things are laid down about the People of the Land: entrust no testimony to them, take no testimony from them, trust them with no secret, do not appoint them guardians of an orphan, do not make them custodians of charitable funds, do not accompany them on a journey.” It was forbidden to be a guest of one of the People of the Land, or to entertain such a person as a guest. It was even laid down that, wherever it was possible, nothing should be bought or sold from one of them. In their proud aristocracy and intellectual snobbery and spiritual pride, the Pharisees looked down in contempt on the ordinary man. (Barclay, John p 253).

Is this not precisely what we are observing in our text this morning? The Pharisees are saying quite clearly, “Nobody who is spiritually and academically of any account has believed on Jesus. Only ignorant fools accept him.” (Ibid, 253).

Intellectual snobbery is commonplace amongst those who think they are experts in any field as in comparison with the masses of “uninformed laypeople.” In this case, the intellectual snobs were the most religious people in town…the professional rule-followers…those who felt they knew the scriptures SO well that they could not possibly believe in Jesus; and anyone who disagreed with them was clearly uninformed, ignorant, and accursed! The conviction of the crowds that Jesus was the Prophet or even the Messiah counted for nothing since these people of the land were little more than animals who were easily deceived. And of course, the Pharisees are inferring the same thing about the temple guards, right? Did you hear their argument? “None of the important people…the experts…the informed…the authorities…none of the people who matter believe in Jesus. So obviously Jesus is a phony!” Talk about pride…wow.

In our increasingly secular culture, authors promoting the “New Atheism” such as Dr. Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens reek of intellectual snobbery when they suggest that only uneducated, simplistic, unsophisticated and unscientific fools would accept Jesus as Lord. Never mind that hundreds and thousands of the world’s greatest thinkers in every field have been devoted Jesus followers over the past 2000 years!
Sadly, however, we can often find similar attitudes of intellectual snobbery amongst those who fancy themselves to be Christian apologists, church officials or even certain pastors from certain denominations who tend to think they are the experts, while the masses of laypeople…even their own church members…can’t be trusted to think for themselves. This was a critical mistake of the Roman Catholic Church for hundreds of years. The scriptures were only available to the elite; the masses were not trusted with the Word of God…it was a classic example of intellectual snobbery in my estimation

Church: intellectual snobbery is antithetical to Christianity in every respect, and I say that as a “professional Christian leader” who is very aware that intellectual snobbery still lives and breathes in seminaries, denominations, and even amongst local church leaders…God forbid that it should still live in me. However, let me say it again so as to be perfectly clear: Intellectual snobbery is antithetical to Christianity in every respect. Jesus made it very clear in Matthew 18:3 that unless we become like a little child, we will never enter the Kingdom of God. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 1:27-29: 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. To be a follower of Jesus is to be a student and an apprentice to Jesus, the Teacher of all teachers. Which means never stop learning. No matter how well read you might think you are; no matter how politically astute and sophisticated you fancy yourself; Jesus is not done teaching you yet! There is much to learn…even about topics you have long put to rest. I mentioned last week during the Q&A that I recently went through a 9-week course called Be the Bridge. It was a small group experience with white people and black people who honestly engaged the subject of racial reconciliation within the context of Jesus and His gospel. It was a humbling experience for me. I learned a lot about myself, and even more importantly, I learned to appreciate the perspectives and experiences of my black brothers and sisters. I recognized my own passive compliance with systems and attitudes that contribute to racial inequality and work contrary to my heart’s desire for racial reconciliation. Listen: we don’t know what we don’t know, and there is yet much we don’t actually know until we have humbled ourselves and listened. If we are going to be learners, we must resist intellectual snobbery. We must resist thinking we already know the answers before even listening to another point of view. Resist thinking you are the smartest person in the room…trust me, God knows how to humble a person like that.

When I graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1996, it is possible that I was a bit full of myself and exhibiting a bit of intellectual snobbery. I’m just saying…it’s possible! So, God in His great wisdom sent us to rural eastern NC, to a small town with the population of 4000 people in a county of 15000 people…to a church with 200 members. Plymouth was a papermill town surrounded by rich farmlands, and I can say with some degree of certainty that Princeton graduates were few and far between. I served at First Baptist Church in Plymouth for 7 years, and I have never been so humbled in all my life…in fact, I’m pretty sure that was why God sent me to that wonderful group of people! I learned very quickly that mill workers, farmers, and fishermen…the people of the land…were not the least bit ignorant or unsophisticated in their thinking. In fact, I learned very quickly that most of the “lay people” in that little church knew the Bible as well or better than I did! I also learned that my highfaluting, Ivy League religious education did not always align with the teachings of Jesus, and soon those I had been called to
“teach” were teaching me. God chose the simple, hard-working residents of Plymouth, NC to shame the “wise-guy” from Princeton…and I am grateful.

Now, before I move on to my final point, I would make a simple observation based upon 30 years of theological studies and ministry: you will rarely find a truly brilliant person who is an intellectual snob. Most intellectual snobs are those who wish the world to believe they are brilliant, when in fact, they are not! The truly brilliant ones are usually quite humble…they are profound and gifted listeners, and they are always asking very good questions. And that leads me to my fourth and final point…

**IV. Intellectual Integrity**

Having just claimed that no one important believed in Jesus, the Pharisees are shocked by what happens next. John writes in vss. 50-52: 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51 “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” 52 They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.”

This is a classic moment in John’s Gospel, and a little bit funny! So, if you recall, we first met Nicodemus in John 3 where we learned that he was considered “the Teacher of Israel.” Nicodemus was not just a Pharisee, he was likely the most revered and respected Pharisee in the land, and specifically because he was the guy people wanted to learn from. He was brilliant…clearly more brilliant than the rest. Now…we know that Nicodemus sought an audience with Jesus early on, when Jesus was previously in Jerusalem, and we unpacked that conversation in John 3. We also know, that following the crucifixion of Jesus, Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathea, another member of the council, in caring for the body of Jesus and providing a small fortune in spices and ointments. In other words, we can likely assume that Nicodemus eventually became a Jesus follower. Now, here in vs. 50, we can’t know for certain if Nicodemus is fully aligning himself with Jesus yet. However, Nicodemus stands up—this time in broad daylight--and he asks a question that flips the tables on the snobby Pharisees.

Nicodemus, the most respected teacher of Israel, reminds the rule-followers of their own hypocrisy. He asks, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” The answer is a clear, NO! Nicodemus is actually quoting rabbinic law that stated, “Unless a mortal hears the pleas that man can put forward, he is not able to give judgment” (Exod. Rab. 21.3).

Nicodemus points out the irony here: these Pharisees who fancy themselves as the moral elite are the very same people who are contradicting their own law. Notice that Nicodemus is not just quoting rabbinic law; we know this is also a conviction he lived out when he sought a personal audience with Jesus. Nicodemus went to Jesus and listened to what He had to say; he gave Jesus a fair hearing…and that, my friends, is a beautiful illustration of intellectual integrity. Intellectual integrity requires that we give people a fair hearing before making a judgment. Intellectual integrity requires that we resist snobbery; we resist dismissing a person based on their race, resume or pedigree. Look to the truly brilliant people who are humble and thirsty for knowledge and truth, and they regularly demonstrate this kind of intellectual integrity.

Now, you will recognize intellectual snobbery in the response of the Pharisees in vs. 52: They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.”
Intellectual snobbery always attacks the questioner rather than addressing the question. That is exactly how the Pharisees respond to the most notable, respected teacher in Israel. As if he was unfamiliar with what the scriptures say! Talk about arrogance. And the Pharisees were wrong, by the way. Jonah was a prophet that hailed from the region of Galilee, and even several rabbis from the ancient world observed that there was not a single tribe from amongst the twelve tribes of Israel from which God did not raise up a prophet. The Pharisees may have been referring to the prophecy concerning “the Prophet” like Moses, but that particular prophecy clearly states that the Prophet would come from among the Jews with no mention of any particular region. It is amazing how often intellectual snobbery and ignorance go hand in hand. I pray that we, as a church, will be careful listeners and students of the truth. I pray that we will resist intellectual snobbery, prejudice, and shallow, reactionary thinking. Like Nicodemus, I pray that we will resist judgment until a fair hearing and examination are provided, regardless of the person or the situation.

Church, let me conclude with this challenge: listen to Jesus for yourself. Read what He said. Exercise intellectual integrity as you seek to learn truth. Exercise intellectual integrity regarding your faith as well as these controversial issues in our culture. As Jesus said earlier in John 7, when you judge, use right judgement. Embrace Jesus the Divider. Invite Jesus into your everyday ways of thinking, believing, reacting, and behaving. Invite Jesus to divide the good from the bad, the righteous from the evil, the truth from the lies. Friends…Listen to Jesus…no one ever spoke like this man!

Let us pray.