The Gospel of John: *The Greater One*
John 8:48-59

48 The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” 49 Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. 50 Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” 52 The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” 54 Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ 55 But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” 57 So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” 58 Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” 59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

My message this morning is entitled, “I AM,” and it will fall under 3 subheadings: 1) The Irony of our Offense; 2) The Mission; and 3) He Who is Greater.

I. The Irony of our Offense

As we return to John’s gospel, we are deep into a lengthy discourse that takes place in the temple between Jesus and “the Jews.” Here in John’s gospel, “the Jews” represent two groups of people: 1) those who believe in Jesus for what they think He can do for their country; and 2) those who don’t believe in Jesus and are trying to put a stop to His ministry. As we’ve seen over the past few weeks, Jesus is quite successful in offending both “the believers” and the “non-believers”! Why? Because Jesus speaks the truth that comes straight from the Father, and sinful human beings are not at all inclined to yield to the truth—even those sinful human beings who claim to believe in Jesus.

The offense of Jesus in chapter 8 began when Jesus humiliated the Jewish authorities following their effort to entrap Him. Jesus then goes on to say several offensive things to the Jews: 1) that He is the light of the world; 2) that He is not of this world; 3) that those who hold to His word will be set free; and 4) that those who do not listen to Him or love Him are not true children of Abraham or children of God…instead, they are slaves to sin and children of the devil.

Understandably, “the Jews” are fairly outraged by all that Jesus has been saying, and so our text this morning begins with their response: “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?”

The irony here is rich, right? Here we have the Son of God—He who, in the beginning, was both with God and was God according to John 1. All these people standing before Jesus would not have a body or a soul or a name or an idea were it not for Him. Not one of these people could convict Jesus of sinning…as we saw last week. And yet, the most informed religious people on the planet, having heard everything that Jesus just said, come to this conclusion: Jesus is a Samaritan…an enemy of the state…and he is under the control of a demon…thus making Him a servant of Satan and an enemy of the true faith.
William Barclay writes: “How extraordinary that the Son of God should be branded as a heretic. And beyond a doubt it would happen to him again if he returned to this world and its churches.” How sad and yet how true are Barclay’s words.

One of the great ironies that I observed in my seminary experience was how much people supposedly “loved” Jesus, but then ignored or even refuted what Jesus actually said. Why? Because the Jesus of their own making always complimented and affirmed their religious, social, and philosophical commitments. The actual Jesus of the NT, however, did not always fit into their theological constructions, and so the Jesus of the NT was often replaced with their redacted and preferred version of “Jesus. Church, we all love Jesus until Jesus disagrees with us, and then Jesus has to go, right? Why? Because we couldn’t possibly be wrong! We know what we know! We know good theology…we know what is true and what is not true…we know what we have experienced…we know who we have read…so if Jesus doesn’t fit into our preferred theological, social, or political framework, He has to go, right?

Church, pay particular attention to those times that Jesus offends you--your offense will most often reveal your idolatry. For the Jews in the first century, their offense revealed their idol of nationalism based upon their status as descendants of Abraham. Because of their presumed national superiority, they were convinced of their own “rightness.” Their offense also revealed their idol of self-reliance. These were intelligent, well-read people…quite certain of their ability to draw reasonable conclusions based upon their experiences and their education. Thus, the teachings of Jesus offended their intelligence and common sense. Does any of that sound familiar?

Many of us have “idols” in our lives. Idols are those good things that we have made into ultimate things. An idol has an immutable, almost “god-like” authority, and for that reason our idols often serve as our “functional deities.” Your functional deity is whatever holds your greatest loyalty, your deepest love, and your most impassioned commitment in your everyday life. Many of us claim to love God and to serve God when, in fact, our greatest loyalty, deepest love, and most impassioned commitment is to something or someone else. For many of us, our families serve as functional deities. For others, it is our work, our intelligence, our hobbies, or even our own form of nationalism. Should Jesus challenge our functional deities, we might be amazed how quickly we would “demonize” Jesus instead of acknowledging and ridding ourselves of idols.

Look to the Jews in John 8 for our example. Instead considering the possibility that Jesus was right--instead of re-evaluating their presumptions and foregone conclusions—instead of recognizing their idols of nationalism and self-reliance, the offended Jews conclude that Jesus is a demonized heretic…and then they do what offended people do…they call Him names and mock Him…calling our Lord a Samaritan and a demonic.

Listen to how Jesus patiently responds in vs. 49: I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.
Church, the last words that I ever want to hear from Jesus are these words He spoke to the Jews in the temple that day: “You dishonor me.” When we allow our idols to critique Jesus, we dishonor Jesus. When we dishonor Jesus, we dishonor the Father.

Jesus states, “Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.”

Jesus knows that His credibility is in question if He comes across as a glory seeker. He knows that it is shockingly easy to seek one’s own glory. But here’s what the Bible tells us: all glory and honor belong to God (1 Timothy 1:17). In the end, God will judge those who dishonor His Son…He will judge those who sought glory for themselves or gave glory to their idols. God seeks the glory because the glory is His and His alone. If Jesus is to be glorified, the glory will come from the Father, not from men. In the same vein, followers of Jesus should seek their glory from the Father, not the applause of men.

Now, I know that sounds predictable and even redundant, but let me point out something obvious here, just in case you missed it. When Jesus stepped into human culture and spoke the truth…when Jesus challenged the culturally accepted idols of nationalism and self-reliance…when Jesus suggested that HE was the center of all human existence, the light of the world, the pathway to freedom, and the only One who has truly known the Father…He was called a demonized heretic by those who thought themselves to be intelligent, religious, and patriotic people.

Question: if we are followers of Jesus who step into culture and call out the socially acceptable idols such as nationalism and self-reliance and present Jesus as the exclusive center of human existence…what do you think people are going to call us? I can tell you from personal experience…that doesn’t go well. A few weeks ago I preached a message that challenged the idol of nationalism that is alive and well in the American, evangelical church. I specifically said that America has never been a “Christian” nation, and that we should not refer to America as a Christian country, particularly in light of the egregious sins of our past including the eradication of Native Americans and the African slave trade. That comment got me into a lot of trouble with several people, and some people have apparently left the church as a result of what I said.

I repent for making such a statement and just leaving it out there without making myself clear. I do not repent for challenging the idol of nationalism that so quickly contaminates biblical Christianity. So, at the risk of offending your further, I would like to take a moment to unpack America’s relationship with Christianity and why I think that resisting the idol of nationalism is so important.

First, I recognize that many of us have two tremendous passions that tend to sit close to one another: we love Jesus, and we love our country; and Church, that is how it should be. However, we must be careful when it comes to our national pride. I have national pride…I love my country, and I would gladly defend my country if called upon to do so. I have made my pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the country for which it stands countless times. National pride is generally a “good” thing, but it can never become an “ultimate” thing…lest it become an idol. My primary, ultimate allegiance is to Jesus and His
Kingdom—not the United States of America. If that offends you, OK, but you have to ask yourself, “Why am I so offended?” As I understand the scriptures, we are to have no other gods before us…including our country. Which means, if the teachings of Jesus critique our country—if the Gospel critiques our practices, our politics, our politicians, or our policies—I have to be OK with that because Kingdom trumps country. That’s how it works in Christendom, not only here in American, but in every country where Christians live. Nationalism leads us to make an idol out of our nation. Please resist the idol of nationalism…the idol of nationalism made the Jews deaf to the teachings of Jesus, and if we’re not careful, the same can happen to us.

Secondly, some people accused me of disrespecting the soldiers who died defending our country apparently because they assume our soldiers all believed they were defending a Christian nation. That is not true…not in the least. We must remember that there were many souls who gave up their lives defending our country who felt valued, affirmed, protected, and free to NOT be a Christian. Numerous non-Christian soldiers died to protect this country they loved specifically because they were free to worship as they felt led…or not to worship at all…without fear of persecution. In my humble opinion, we dishonor the sacrifice of non-Christian, American soldiers when we say they died to protect “a Christian nation.” They did no such thing. They died for the republic which gave them the freedom to worship or not to worship according to their conscience.

Some of you appealed to the founding fathers as evidence that we were founded as a Christian nation. I would remind you that many of the leading founding fathers of our country were deists. Several, including Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and Robert Paine, were card-carrying Freemasons who held Christianity to be one form of spiritual enlightenment among many. It is true that many of the founding fathers were Christians, and that much of our constitution was deeply informed by Christian values and the teachings of the Bible, but I think it quite obvious and historically documented that the founders of the United States were profoundly committed to protect against a state-sanctioned religion. Though a general reference to God the Creator is present in our documents, there is no mention of Jesus Christ in our constitution or the Declaration of Independence. On the contrary, in The Treaty with Tripoli, which was approved unanimously by the Senate in 1797 under the administration of John Adams (a very committed follower of Christ), we find in Article 11 of the treaty "[T]he government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."

Church, listen carefully: our founding fathers, who were mostly Christians, were also students of history. Our founding fathers understood that a state-sanctioned religion would inevitably get corrupted and lead to oppression in God’s name. Thus, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they sought to create a republic without any kind of state-sanctioned religion. In their own words, “The United State is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” Influenced by Christianity? Yes! Founded as a Christian nation? No.

Now, I am aware that, at times, there were very committed Christians who sat in the oval office and many committed Christians who served as leaders in congress. I am aware of the Christian worship services that once took place in the Capitol, and the strategies for Christian evangelism that once occupied the thinking of our congressmen. There have always been and still are many devoted Christian leaders in our country, for which I am immensely grateful. I am aware that for
most of our history, the vast majority of our citizens have claimed to be Christian. Nevertheless, the United States was established as and remains a republic where there is to be no state sanctioned religion; every person’s right to worship is protected, regardless of their god or religion or lack thereof. Such is why a Satan worshipper is every bit as “American” as a Presbyterian—as are the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists and the atheists. It is simply inaccurate, both in principle and in reality, to declare America to be “a Christian nation.”

Now…why does that matter? Here’s why: when we tell the world that America is a Christian nation, when we post such things on the internet and constantly wrap the cross in an American flag, we unwittingly communicate to the rest of the world, and particularly eastern cultures (comprised mostly of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus) that to be a Christian is to be like an American and to live a western lifestyle. This singular association of Christianity with American, western materialism and immorality has done greater harm to the work of our Christian missionaries overseas than any other tactic of the Enemy. Ask any missionary in any country other than America, and they will beg you: please do not equate America with Christianity!

Think about it: we never want to associate Christianity with “those people who mowed over the Native Americans and owned slaves.” Americans mowed down the first people of the land; Americans owned slaves; but those practices were NOT expressions of Christianity. Those practices were in antithesis to biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity critiques and condemns “Manifest Destiny.” Biblical Christianity critiques and condemns slavery. Biblical Christianity critiques and condemns western materialism and immorality. I hope you get this point, because it’s super important. If we continue to insist that America is a Christian nation, then what America does presents to the world what Christianity does…and that is a horrifying thought. The cross of Jesus Christ is not to be draped with the American flag…or any country’s flag for that matter. The cross of Jesus Christ stands above all countries and is defined by none.

Now…do I love our country? Absolutely! Am I grateful for those who fought to defend our freedoms? Absolutely. My grandfather fought in WWII, my father in Vietnam, and my brother in Afghanistan. I am a patriot…like many of you. Do I pray for God’s favor, mercy, and protection for our country? Yes. Am I grateful for what God has accomplished for the glory of His Son in and through His Church in America? Yes. God has accomplished many wonderful and noble things through the United States of American…no question. Does God have a special plan according to His providence for our nation? Absolutely. But does that mean that we should think of ourselves as a “Christian nation”? No…it means we should think of ourselves as a nation where a lot of wonderful Christians live, and thanks be to God, we are currently enjoying the freedom to worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and to support the spread of the Gospel all over the world. Let us give God the glory for inspiring our forefathers to create a country without a government sanctioned religion. Let us give thanks for all those who sacrificed their lives and wellbeing to earn the freedoms that we enjoy. But let us also honor the fact that our Muslim, Hindu, and atheist neighbors are just as American as we are. And listen: I celebrate that our non-believing citizens are free to worship or not worship without coercion or threat from a “Christian government.” Here’s why: Christianity can never be pressed upon people at the tip of a sword or by the order of a government…people can and will only come to Jesus when they know they are free not to. I thank God for our country, because people are free to come to Jesus
or not…and that is how it should be. Now…there is more I could say about the new state-sanctioned religion called secular-humanism that is currently undermining the intent of our founding fathers and the constitution…but that is a sermon for another day! For now, please give careful thought to what I have said. I don’t expect you all to agree with me, by the way. I know that many of us will have to agree to disagree. If I offended you again, I’m sorry, truly…that was not my intent. I have been your pastor for 12 years, and you know that I love you, you know that I love the United States…but Church, I hope you know that I love Jesus more than I love you or the United States, and I want to do everything in my power to avoid dishonoring HIS NAME. HIS NAME, the Name above all names, does not belong to America. HIS NAME does not equal America or equate to American morality. HIS NAME critiques America and the American culture, just as HIS NAME critiques every country and every culture. Here’s the good news: Jesus did not come to simply critique, He came to save! The Kingdom of God consists of all those who will repent and call upon His name, placing their faith, loyalty, and commitment upon HIM above all others. These souls…citizens of the Kingdom…the Redeemed…will gather from every tribe, tongue and nation and we will be One around the Throne! Oneness is accomplished in HIS NAME. Black, white, republican, democrat, American, Russian, Kenyan, Haitian, Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese…Oneness and Salvation come in HIS NAME.

As John records in Revelation 7:9: “After this I looked, and behold, I saw a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in hand, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” What an amazing picture of the life to come! Now Church: did you hear it? Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb…and that is exactly what Jesus says next in John 8 beginning in vs. 51, “Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” Let us quickly consider my second subheading:

II. The Mission

The Jews are offended, so they have written Jesus off as a demon-possessed Samaritan. That’s what happens when people offend us…we call them names, right? “Demon-possessed Samaritan” was the insult of choice for the Jews; but even so, with infinite patience and consistency, Jesus reminds them of His mission and what is at stake: Jesus came to save human souls from DEATH…the deep, horrible, spiritual kind of death from which there is no hope of return. Salvation comes through abiding in HIS word. Jesus is the pathway…and there is no other.

Now, this claim that keeping and abiding in the words of Jesus is the means of escaping death was actually insulting to the intelligence of the Jews, who, of course, took Jesus quite literally. They reply, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?”

Notice how the Jews have painted themselves into a corner. The claims that Jesus have made can lead to only three possibilities. Either Jesus is lying; Jesus is a demon-possessed lunatic; or
Jesus is claiming to be greater than Abraham and the prophets…in fact, Jesus would be claiming to be equal with God Himself! They ask if Jesus thinks He is greater than Abraham and the prophets, assuming the answer is NO! For the Jews, these are common sense questions. What the Jews have failed to yet realize is that Jesus is anything but common! And that leads me to my third and final subheading…

III. He Who Is Greater

Jesus responds to the Jews in vs. 54, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of who you say, ‘He is our God.’ But you have not known Him. I know Him. If I were to say that I do not know Him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know Him, and I keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”

The first thing to notice here is that Jesus does not deny being greater than Abraham and the prophets. And yet, Jesus knows that to come out and explicitly say that He was greater than Abraham and the prophets would likely be perceived as glorifying Himself, so Jesus once again defers to the Father. The Father glorifies the Son, and that is how we know Jesus is greater than Abraham and the prophets. Jesus will be glorified when He is raised up on the cross and again when He is raised from the dead. Looking back over the past 2000 years, we now have the privilege of observing how often and how powerfully the Father has glorified His Son in so many ways, in so many people, so many ministries, so many acts of sacrifice and mercy in His name! Who could deny that the Father has glorified the name of Jesus Christ and given Him the name above all names?

Jesus goes on to articulate the intimacy He enjoys with the Father when twice He states, “I know Him.” Make no mistake Church: Jesus’ intimacy with the Father is what empowers Him to withstand criticism, name calling, disrespect, and eventually crucifixion. The same was true for the Apostle Paul. In a particularly difficult time in his life, Paul wrote these words in 2 Cor. 4:16-18: So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Church: are you struggling today? Do your family members insult you and think you are fool for your faith? Have you experienced painful isolation and anxiety from these lonely days of Covid 19? Is your spirit troubled by the rioting and the racial tension that you can cut with a knife? Is your body aching and your heart breaking? Look to Jesus here in John 8. Look to Paul in 2 Corinthians 4. The key to perseverance, joy, and peace in the midst of terribly difficult circumstances comes from an intimacy with the Father…it is there, in the presence of the Father, that our inner self is being renewed day by day. Spend time with the Father in prayer, in nature, in the company of the faithful, and be renewed by your Father in heaven. Then go back into the world and contend for the truth and justice…contend for the Gospel…fight the good fight…engage the culture and run the race set before you. But don’t forget to return to the Father…to spend intimate time with Him…that is how our inner lives are renewed day by day.

This intimacy with the Father is what so deeply defined the very essence of Jesus. Which is why, by the way, Jesus immediately discerns: these men standing before Him do not know His
Father. Whatever god they claim to worship, it is not the same One Jesus knows so well. When these men say “He is our God,” they are lying.

Friends, let me ask you a question: are you lying? Are you lying to God? Are you lying to yourself? Who is your god, actually? Who is your functional deity on an average day? Where do you place all your faith, hope, and love? Who do you worship? Is it the God revealed in scripture: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit…the One who made us in His image? Or do you worship a god of your own making…a god formed in your own image…a god who exists to remind you of how right you are? Here is what Jesus said recently: “If God were your Father, you would love me.” Here’s what Paul just said: intimacy with the Father leads to the renewal of the inner man. If you know the Father, you love Jesus. If you know the Father and worship the One True God, the inner man is renewed day by day, no matter how horrible the circumstances. Your self-made god cannot renew your inner man…only the Father can do that…and the only way to the Father is through His Son…amen?

Now, Jesus says something quite mysterious towards the end of His response to the Jews. He states, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”

Jesus acknowledges that Abraham rejoiced at the hope of Messiah, and by God’s grace, Abraham “saw” the day of the Lord and was glad. Jesus knows something the Jews don’t! Jesus has a familiarity with Abraham that bewilders the Jewish listeners, even as it bewilders us. This bewilderment leads the Jews to ask, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”

The Jews are mocking Jesus because He is yet a young man, likely just over 30 years old, and not yet considered an elder—so how could He possibly have such familiarity with Abraham! They observe, “You’re not even 50!”…because apparently turning 50 means you are elderly. That hurt.

Here in vs. 57 we should imagine that the Jews are literally laughing in amazement and mockery, more convinced than ever that Jesus is a few sandwiches short of a picnic…that is until Jesus responds in vs. 58, “Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

When Jesus says, “Before Abraham was, I am,” there is no mistaking what He is saying: Jesus is claiming to be One with the Father in nature to the extent that He has always been, and is always, and will always be with God the Father. Though we know that Jesus was physically born to a virgin named Mary, the pre-incarnate Jesus was before Abraham and shared the “I AM” nature of the Father as John explained in John 1. NT scholar Leon Morris writes: When Jesus is asserting his existence in the time of Abraham, there is no other way of understanding it. It is eternity of being and not simply being that has lasted through several centuries that the expression indicates.

The Jews heard blasphemy…Jesus claimed equality with God, “So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”
Some critics claim that Jesus never identified Himself as divine...as God. I disagree: He just did. That’s what the Jews heard...which is why they tried to stone Him at once. Again, we observe that no one will touch Jesus until “his hour has come” which is why God delivers Him from the hands of these angry men...for now.

We’ll stop there and pick up the Gospel of John beginning in chapter 9 in a few weeks. For now, I want you to remember: Jesus is the Greater One. He is not just an enlightened prophet amongst many others. He is not a crazy demon-possessed Samaritan. Jesus claimed to be of the same nature as God...He claimed an eternity of being...and then He rose again on the third day! Which means when we see Jesus, we see God incarnate.

Look to Him! Look to the One who came to set us free from the tyranny of our sin and the falsehood of our idols, both individually and in our community. Look to the Lamb who came to deliver us from DEATH, that we might pass from this life to ETERNAL LIFE. Call upon the Light of the World to reveal the darkness in us and in our country that we might repent and be reconciled to God and to one another. Church, there is a hurting world all around us and they do not know that God sent His Son to rescue them...it’s our job to tell them. It’s our privilege to serve Jesus and to advance His soul-saving mission, and it is our duty and the purpose of our existence to be the light of Christ and to give all the glory and honor to God our Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let us not bow to a lesser god...look to Jesus, for He is the Greater One.

Let us pray.