

The Great “I Am”

John 8:48-59

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

May 22, 2016 – Holy Trinity Sunday



In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It’s not unusual for people to be passionate about their religious beliefs. When it comes to matters of faith – issues that form both character and conviction – people of faith will be eager, yes, sometimes even zealous, to share their deep-seated religious beliefs with others. Likewise, they are just as likely to be fervent and obstinate when called upon to defend those beliefs – especially if someone has the audacity to suggest that what they believe might be wrong. Indeed, it’s quite likely that if it turns out a person is actually mistaken about what they believe, they’re often inclined to adopt the kind of stubborn attitude which says: “My mind is made up, don’t confuse me with the facts!”

In a situation such as that, the issue then becomes one of emotion and pride – as opposed to reason and truth. And, no doubt, you’ve all experienced what that’s like when conversations about sensitive issues quickly degenerate into angry accusations and name-calling. Today’s Gospel text is a prime example. Jesus had been discussing the matter of His teaching with some of the leaders of the Jews – primarily because it had become more than evident to them what Jesus had been implying with His speech and His words. He had been claiming such a close, direct connection with God that He appeared to be placing His own being on a par with the existence of the Divine. In other words, He was claiming to be God! Needless to say, it didn’t take long before their side of the conversation began to take on a very nasty tone.

They said to Him: “Are we not right in saying that You are a Samaritan, and that You have a demon?” Now, to call someone a Samaritan was akin to using a racial slur in our own day. And when you consider how these Jews went even further by accusing Jesus of being demon-possessed – well, the allegation speaks for itself. Still, in spite of their rancor, Jesus countered their charges not in kind, but with righteous, truthful words. He told them plainly: “I do not have a demon, but I honor

My Father, and you dishonor Me.” By dishonoring Jesus they were dishonoring God Himself, because even though they didn’t realize it, in the person of Jesus, God in human flesh, they were telling God *to His face* that *He* was demon-possessed! I find it incredible that our Lord didn’t strike them down right then and there. Rather He continued speaking the truth in love. “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My Word, he will never see death.” Though Jesus’ enemies were treating Him unmercifully, He still held out His mercy to them. If they kept His Word – if they honored, trusted, cherished and believed His Word – even they would receive the gift of eternal life.

Unfortunately, their minds were already made up. They weren’t about to be confused with the facts. “Are You greater than our father Abraham, who died?” they countered. “And the prophets died, too! Who do You make Yourself out to be?” If it hadn’t dawned on them already – and it doesn’t appear that it had – they were about come face to face with the ultimate truth as Jesus answered their question. He said to them: “Who do you make yourself out to be?” “If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing,” said Jesus. “It is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’” It’s almost as if He was saying to them: “Anyone can boast about himself, and make himself out to be something.” But that wasn’t why Jesus came. He came as Servant of all. As true God in the likeness of man Jesus had no need for others to build Him up in the eyes of the world – for even in human flesh He already had, and was, God.

And so He said to these Jews: “Unlike you, who have not known God, I know Him. Indeed, 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.” The resentment and hatred these men felt toward Jesus escalated as they heard His cutting words calling their own religious beliefs into question – and on top of that, accusing them – the “pillars” of Israel’s religious community – of being liars. But Jesus wasn’t through. Pressing on, He held

up the example of the patriarch, Abraham, as one who had a proper belief in God. “Your father Abraham,” He said, “he saw My day and was glad.” Abraham had seen Jesus in faith through the promises of the prophets, and had placed his trust solely in the mercy and grace of God. Abraham believed the promise made to Adam and Even in the Garden – and later to him, when God swore that he and Sarah would have a son even in their old age who would be in the line of the Messiah. Abraham believed, and God credited that to Him as righteousness. Because God had given Abraham the righteousness of His Son as a gift, Abraham was therefore glorified, because through faith, he had been granted a share in the kingdom and the righteousness of God.

The Jews, however, couldn’t see beyond their own *self*-righteousness, and they weren’t about to stand still while Jesus told them their deep-seated religious convictions were wrong. Hence they entirely missed the point of Jesus’ words. That was when they turned to Him and said: “You are not yet fifty years old, and you’ve seen Abraham?” Jesus replied: “Truly, truly, I say unto you, before Abraham was, **I Am.**” **I Am. I Am** was the name by which God identified Himself to Moses as he stood there before Him at the burning bush. And now Jesus was identifying Himself to these Jews using the very same Divine Name. There could no longer be any question in the minds of these Jewish leaders as to what Jesus was saying. He *was* claiming to be God, the Great **I Am**. And so they picked up stones and sought to kill Him because they believed He had committed a great blasphemy. But it was not His time to die – not now.

How easy it is for sinful pride and arrogance to escalate to murderous proportions. When it comes to the truth of God’s Word, there’s still a part of us that doesn’t want to be confused with the facts. Whether it’s in regard to some matter of doctrine, or our own unrighteous behavior, we don’t handle the truth all that well when God’s Word shows us where we’re wrong. And while none of us like to be shown how wrong we are, some never get beyond that prideful attitude. And so, as at the conclusion of today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus goes His way and leaves these unbelieving Jews all alone in their own little temple defending to the death how “spiritual” they are – when the reality is that

they’ve remade the lie of Satan into a God and religion of their own design. How dangerous pride is. No wonder Holy Scripture states that it always precedes destruction and the fall.

But, God in His mercy, still steadfastly continues speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Every question, all arguments, the gravest of concerns, and every prayer, God answers only with the truth of His Word. When people are confused about what they should believe, it’s an open invitation to sit down with them and open up the pages of Holy Scripture to show them the truth from God’s Word. When differing opinions cause conflicting thoughts concerning certain Christian teachings, it must and always be God’s Word which gives the final, definitive, ultimate answer. When you’re drifting or confused about which path you ought to take, God’s Word must always serve as your unerring guide.

You see, when it comes down to that most revealing question of the Jews to Jesus – and yes, to us: “Who do You make Yourself out to be?” the only answer you can give is the one our Lord gives us – namely, that we are first and foremost children of God – though still sinners – because we’ve been Baptized into the name of our Holy, righteous, Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Like Abraham, you too have been blessed to see the Lord’s day. By a faith like his, you are given to know that you also have been counted righteous in God’s sight. It’s a humble belief, dear Christian, a belief which only God can give, a belief which can honestly say: “It’s not in how I live my life, but in the life Christ lived for me, that God has assured me of my salvation.” It’s this attitude, which only Christ can give – an attitude that boasts of no personal opinion, no manmade knowledge, nor any self-acquired wisdom – but an attitude that yields itself quietly and humbly to the wisdom of God’s Word alone. This is what defines who you are as a Christian – what God has made you to be. Yours, by God’s free grace and favor, is the identity of Jesus, which God, in His wisdom and infinite mercy has given to you as a free gift by the power of the Holy Spirit working in your heart through the simple means of words, water, bread and wine. May it always be so for Jesus’ sake, and to the glory of God’s most holy Triune Name. Amen.