

Connections
John 7:25-53

“So, where are you from?” This is what we ask whenever we meet someone new, isn’t it? And if that someone is from Mississippi, chances are that we will make a connection: that our new acquaintance has a friend that we also know. We might even discover that we are somehow distantly related.

No, it’s no wonder that the people of Jesus’ day were interested in His origins. After all, Jesus conducted His entire earthly ministry in an area much smaller than Mississippi. And verses 31 and 46 tell us that He was saying and doing some pretty amazing things – so much so that some of the people in verse 40 thought He was the great Prophet that Moses had promised would come. Others went so far as to affirm that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Son of David Who would rule and reign over the whole world, the One Whose coming was foretold in Old Testament passages like those that we read responsively this morning.

But given what the people thought they knew about Jesus, He didn’t seem to fit all those prophecies that we read. Some of the people, perhaps focusing on those verses from Daniel 7, insisted that the Messiah would be a mysterious, heavenly figure, coming in clouds of glory. And yet, as Jesus pointed out in verse 28, they knew Jesus had grown up in Nazareth in Galilee. They knew that He was a real man, Who had a real birthday that we celebrate this time of year. And so they just couldn’t see how someone with such ordinary, even humble beginnings could possibly be the Son of Man that Daniel so vividly describes, the One to whom God the Father would give “an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away.”

You know, there are still lots of people for whom the humanity of Jesus is a problem, people who just can’t understand how God could possibly become a man, much less a baby lying in a manger. For example, modern Jews and Muslims alike deny the divinity of Jesus, and for the same basic reason: neither group can believe that an infinite God could possibly take on finite flesh, limiting Himself in such a radical way.

But there are lots of other people who have rejected the notion that God would become a particular man in a particular place in human history. The liberal theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries could not imagine how a God Who was so vast, so far beyond us could possibly reveal Himself in such a concrete, specific way, or could accurately reveal His Will within the constraints of merely human language. The postmodern New Age types of today are equally scandalized by the idea that God would limit Himself to someone so historical as Jesus, or that God would express His Will in objective linguistic propositions.

Of course, all of these impressive sounding theological objections turned out to be quite convenient. For they all keep God confined to the realm of the subjective, excluded from our minds and instead penned up in our feelings. After all, if we feel led to do something, we can just say that God moved us in that direction – and who can possibly argue with something so intimate, so personal? Likewise, if we do something that the Bible labels as sinful, we can just say that we don’t see it that way, or that, whatever the Bible says, we feel that what we are doing is right. No, if Jesus wasn’t really God, then we can hide our sinful behavior under the cover of our urges and emotions, remaining the measure of our own truth.

But what if God really did become the Babe in the manger, Jesus of Nazareth? What if Jesus really did do and say the things that were so amazing to the people who saw and heard Him? Well then, His actions would be the actions of God, and His Words would be the Words of God. And that would also mean that anything that disagreed with His actions or His words couldn’t possibly be in agreement with God’s Will.

You see, that’s the real scandal of Jesus. For in being a real, historical person, and in saying words that were so specifically recorded, Jesus doesn’t allow us to go on imagining God in any way that we want to. Instead, Jesus of Nazareth, Mary’s baby insists that if we want to know what God is like, we have to look at Him. If we want to know

what God says, we have to listen to Him. And if our ideas of God don't agree with what Jesus does or what Jesus says, then it's our ideas of God that are just plain wrong.

For isn't that what Jesus says in verses 28 and 29? He says that He came from God. You see, just like in Mississippi, what's really important about connections isn't geography but people: what's really important is who you know. And so yes, Jesus may have been Mary's baby from Galilee in Nazareth, but His real connections were with God in Heaven, and that means that His words are nothing less than the words of God.

But it was that Galilee connection that caused big problems for some of Jesus' other listeners. Oh, they certainly believed in the existence of God, and they certainly took God's Word very seriously. But because they focused on our responsive reading from Micah chapter 5, they knew that the promised Messiah was supposed to come not only from the lineage of King David, but also to come from David's hometown. It was that passage in Micah, by the way, that allowed the scribes in Herod's court to give proper directions to the wise men from the East who came looking for the newborn King of Israel: the magi went to Bethlehem because that's where the Bible said the Messiah would be born.

And so, many of Jesus' opponents throughout our New Testament passage maintained their vehement opposition to Him, not because they insisted that God was too mysterious and unknowable, like the liberals and postmodernists tend to do. No, they opposed Jesus for a very different reason: because there was something in His connections that they couldn't fit into their Biblical understanding. You see, they had what they thought was an airtight case against Jesus: The Messiah was to come from Bethlehem. Jesus was from Nazareth in Galilee. Therefore, Jesus couldn't be the Messiah.

But because of their singular focus on the fact that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, Jesus' critics glossed over many other obvious facts about Jesus. Of course they ignored His teachings and the miracles He performed. But they also ignored other passages in the Scripture that they claimed to believe so completely, passages that might have called their objections into question – passages like the one from Isaiah 9 that we read this morning.

For what did Isaiah say? That Galilee of the nations, Galilee of the Gentiles would be a great source of blessing for the world, the place from which a great light would shine into the darkness. This same passage said that a child would be born whose name would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

So, why would Jesus' critics overlook a messianic prophecy that so specifically mentions Galilee? Perhaps it's because of what John 7:35 records: how they dismissed the very idea of Jesus reaching out to the Gentiles. For even though Isaiah had made it quite clear that the Messiah would be a blessing to the people walking in darkness and that the Messiah would rule not just over the people of Israel but over the whole world, Jesus' critics just weren't interested in that part of the Scripture. You see, they wanted the Messiah just for themselves, just for their own people, thank you very much. And so, as far as they were concerned, the Gentiles could just go hang.

Such a selective way of reading the Scriptures is tragic, but it wasn't limited to the ancient world. For aren't people still tempted to read the Bible out of context, focusing only on a few passages while conveniently forgetting others? Take for example one of the most quoted passages from the Bible today: "Judge not, that you be not judged." It comes from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 7. It's the perfect passage for today's anything-goes culture, which prizes personal authenticity above all virtues and which recognizes being judgmental as the only true sin. "Don't judge me," the modern world pleads, flinging the words of Jesus in the face of anyone who would dare call their actions or feelings into question.

But, however inconvenient it might be for those who believe that there are no absolute truths, Jesus has a lot of other things to say in the Sermon on the Mount – indeed in the same chapter of Matthew. "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction:" that doesn't sound very much like anything

goes, does it? Or how about this: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.” That sure sounds like God’s Will is an objective, absolute truth that needs to be discovered, not just something we can dream up on our own, or discover simply by the way that we feel.

No, it’s obvious that we can’t take one verse from Matthew 7 out of context, not if we really want to understand it. No, we have to read the whole chapter, the whole Sermon on the Mount, the whole Gospel of Matthew, indeed the whole Bible, to understand what Jesus really means when He condemns passing judgment on others.

So, how did Jesus answer His ancient critics who believed in the truth of the Bible but who insisted on taking passages out of context, who insisted on focusing only on part of God’s Word while ignoring the rest? Well, it might seem strange, but Jesus didn’t set them straight concerning the actual facts of His birth. He didn’t bother to recount the Christmas story of how Mary and Joseph did in fact travel from Galilee to Bethlehem so that Jesus could be born in the City of David just as Micah had predicted hundreds of years before.

Moreover, Jesus didn’t bother to quote from Isaiah 9, the passage that lifted up Galilee as a source of light and blessing for the Gentiles. As a matter of fact, Jesus didn’t cite any of the numerous other Biblical passages that speak of God reaching out to the nations, to the Gentiles, welcoming them into His kingdom. No, Jesus didn’t debate the meaning of any of the Scriptures with His critics.

Instead, He went right to the heart of the matter. He pointed once again to His connections, to the central importance not just of knowing things about Jesus but of trusting Him and of having a personal relationship with Him.

For what did Jesus say to His critics who sneered at the very idea of His reaching out to the Gentiles? “I go to Him who sent me, and where I am, you cannot come.”

For the real problem with Jesus’ critics, either ancient or modern, is not their lack of knowledge about Him. The real problem is that they don’t trust Him. They don’t believe in the One Who comes from the God Who is true. And of necessity that means that they don’t know God or trust God. And so, no matter how much of the Bible they think they know, without trusting Jesus they’ll never really understand it. And without trusting Jesus, they will be shut out of the presence of God forever.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. For the good news is that no one has to go on in the darkness, separated from God either by his rejection of the truth of God’s Word, or by his insistence on his own skewed interpretations of Scripture. For the good news is that Jesus stood up in the middle of the feast, in the middle of all those people who were so confused about Him, in the middle of all those who criticized Him and doubted Him, and said, “Come to Me.” The good news is if Jesus could offer such an unqualified welcome to such doubters and critics, surely that offer could apply to us too.

For what did Jesus promise to them? “If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.” You see, Jesus doesn’t expect any of us to assuage our thirst for knowledge or righteousness or safety or anything else on our own. No, it is Christ alone Who is the source of all truth and light and comfort and blessing.

Yes, the good news is that Jesus promises to teach us, pouring out the light of His truth into the darkness and confusion of this world. And it is Christ alone Who will save us, not because of anything we know or anything we do, but by His own free grace because of His amazing, unconditional love.

But the good news doesn’t stop there. For Jesus’ blessings don’t stop with those who will listen to Him as the divine Word of God, with those who will believe His promises and who will trust Him as their Savior and obey Him as their Lord. For the amazing truth is that those who place their trust in Jesus will also become a source of blessing for others. Yes, we will not just receive the cleansing, refreshing water of the Spirit within ourselves. We will become fountains of this living water, pouring out the love of God on others who are thirsty, giving evidence of the indwelling presence of God’s Holy Spirit to others who are confused about Jesus or even critical of Him.

Yes, the good news is that those who trust in Christ are called to join in His ministry of bringing light and truth and salvation to all the nations of the world. So, will we trust in Him today? No matter how little sense it may make to us, will we believe all of His Word, everything He says? And will we share the good news of Jesus with the world this Christmas season, telling everyone that God sent us salvation on that blessed Christmas morn?