

Blasphemous or Blessed?

I tend to tinker with a sermon right up until the last minute. And I'd like to change my title to: "Life in His Name." But this one will still work.

Let me ask you a question. Do you believe? If so, what do we believe?

We all know what a *heretic* is, right? According to my dictionary it is *someone who dissents from established church dogma, from an accepted belief or doctrine*. Do you know what happens to heretics? At best, they get kicked out of the church. At worst, they get ["finger slashing throat" gesture and sound effect].

Why are heretics considered by some to be so dangerous? Because they are a danger to the Church (capital C). Or as our definition tells us: they are a danger to "established church dogma," from those beliefs or doctrines that have become officially accepted. Accepted, that is, by the powers that be.

Do you know any heretics? Sure you do. Jesus was a heretic.

The "festival of the Dedication" was one of those semi-important holidays in Judaism, kind of like Christmas is in Christianity. What the festival of the Dedication celebrates (and by the way, today it is known as Hannukah) is the cleansing and rededication of the temple by the Maccabee family (father and son), after it had been desecrated by the Syrian emperor Antiochus Epiphanes in the year 165 BC. (There's your history lesson for the day!) So it's not surprising that approximately 165 years later Jesus shows up in the temple in Jerusalem, during the feast of Dedication. After all, Jesus was a Jew.

John tells us that some Jewish leaders came to him and "*gathered around him*." (Perhaps not unlike the picture on the back of this morning's bulletin.) And they asked him a question. "*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.*" So what do you think? What is their motive for asking? I'll come back to that in a bit.

For now, let's look at what Jesus said to these Jewish leaders in response. "*I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.*" (That doesn't seem very nice, does it?)

Believing is one of the most important themes in the Gospel of John. But the question is, believing what? What the Church (capital C) tells us to believe? Or what Jesus invites us to believe? There's a big difference.

And what are these "works" that Jesus is talking about, that supposedly "testify" to his name, and that reveal to the leaders who he is, if only they would believe? In the Gospel of John they stand out as if they were highlighted in bright yellow. When he changed water into wine (that was in John 2). When he healed the royal official's son, who was very close to death (John 4). When he healed the paralytic at the pool (John 5). When he fed a crowd of 5000 with five small barley loaves and two small fish (John 6). When he walked on water (also John 6). When he healed a man that had been blind from birth (that's one of my favorite stories; it's in John 9). And there's one more that hasn't happened yet by Chapter 10, but it will happen in Chapter 11: when he raises Lazarus from the dead. So the question is, what do these seven works or "signs" tell us about who Jesus is? Do they somehow prove he is indeed the Messiah? Which, remember, is the new Davidic king that ancient scripture supposedly predicted, the one who

would at last deliver them from their enemies, which in this case were their Roman oppressors? Wouldn't that be nice?! Except, this man seems nothing like a king?! [show bulletin again]

But Jesus isn't finished responding to the Jewish leaders. "*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*" Is Jesus saying he is something or someone like a shepherd? If so, who are his sheep? And how does he care for them?

"*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.*" I want to be one of his sheep. I want eternal life. I'm not sure what it is, but I want it.

Jesus continues: "*What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch them out of my hand.*" My "Father." To whom is Jesus referring? Is this a reference to Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, the one whose name is supposedly too holy to pronounce? (Oops!)

And then Jesus says it. The very thing these leaders were waiting for, hoping for. "*The Father and I are one.*" That's blasphemy! To say that you are God is blasphemy! It says so in Scripture, in Leviticus. And if we read on from verse 31 and following we find that the Jewish leaders are so worked up they are ready to kill Jesus. Ah, so that's what they are after [hold up bulletin]!

The word "*blasphemy*" is similar to the words "heretic" and "heresy." Someone or something that goes against the accepted teachings of the Church (capital C). And you just don't do that. You don't go against the Church.

Let me ask you: who do you say that Jesus is? Be very careful how you answer that. It could either get you eternal life, or get you killed. So what does the Church (capital C) say?

I brought up here with me a little booklet called *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Sue Buchholz referred to it in her testimony in this past week's e-newsletter. (If you haven't read that yet, I recommend it.) You could say that this is what we Mennonites believe. About God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit, about Scripture, about Sin and Salvation, and so forth. But there's something very important you should know about this book. It does not tell us what we are supposed to believe, what the Church (capital C) insists we believe. (Mennonites are different from other Churches in some respects, and this is one of them.) Rather, our Confession of Faith suggests how we might believe. Or we could say, it invites us to believe. It is like the "works" or "signs" that Jesus was talking about. They point us to something.

This book [hold up the hymnal] does the very same thing. And so does this [hold up a Bible]. They do not tell us what to believe. About God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and Sin, and so forth. They invite us to believe. They are like signs, pointing us to something. They are not that something.

Some would say I have just desecrated Scripture, that I have just blasphemed, that I am a heretic, that I should be kicked out, if not killed. But let me read for you what John himself wrote, as a way to end his Gospel. This is Chapter 20: 30-31, which comes after he had told the story of Jesus' Resurrection, and how he appeared to Mary, and then the rest of the disciples. "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*"

May we come to believe. Not in this [hold up Confession], or in this [hymnal], or in this [Bible], but in what they point to. In the Father. And, in the Son.

I invite you, in the coming days, maybe starting with lunch today, or even right after this worship service, to talk with one another about what you believe about the Father and the Son. Don't worry about getting it exactly right. Just focus on what gives you life.

Amen.