

Lent V (26 March 2023)

“He that is of God heareth God’s words; ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.”

+In the Name...

The Gospel appointed for this morning finds us in the middle of a discussion between the Scribes, Pharisees and Our Lord. Okay, that is a charitable way of putting it. This is more like a playground brawl. And like a brawl during recess at school, or the American political system, alliances can be formed among some unlikely folks. The Pharisees and the Scribes were not normally friends. The Pharisees liked the status quo. They were the establishment, if you will. They liked the law, and better yet, they liked to tell everyone how they should live by the law. The Sadducees did not believe in the oral tradition of the law as the Pharisees did, and they did not believe in any afterlife. These disagreements led to many disputes, but on one thing they could always agree: that new rabbi, the one whose following was growing day by day, he was going to be problematic. So they could agree to disagree on what divided them theologically long enough to challenge that Jesus fellow.

Often times they did not come out swinging. They already knew what too many Christians have forgotten, that many more flies will be attracted with honey than vinegar. And so they would start out sweetly enough, as if they were honestly trying to get His opinion on some important theological matter, but in reality, were hoping to trip Him up and show Him for the fraud they truly believed Him to be.

It can be hard to know what people really believe and what they are truly like, especially if they do not want you to know. Many of you know I used to teach history. I love history, because I love a good story: Picture Washington, DC in 1860. Have you ever heard of Lucy Lambert Hale? She was the daughter of one of New Hampshire's senators, John P. Hale. Miss Hale was a ravishing beauty, and one of the most eligible bachelorettes in Washington, DC. She had a long list of suitors which read like a who's who of the Washington elite, including Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of the 16th president. There was the college freshman at Harvard who sent her flowers when she was only 12. That was William Chandler, who would become the Secretary of the Navy and eventually a U.S. Senator. Then there was Oliver. He thought she was his one

true love, and although Oliver Wendell Holmes never got Lucy's hand in marriage, he did get a seat on the Supreme Court.

But there was one man who outshone all the others. His name was John, and their relationship began with an anonymous letter on Valentine's Day extolling her beauty and virtue. They dated and became engaged, but it was then that his true nature came out. He picked quarrels with Miss Hale all the time, often sparked by his jealousy. They quarreled when they talked politics, they quarreled when Miss Hale danced with the president's son at a ball, they quarreled when Sen. Hale was appointed by the president to be the Ambassador to Spain. That was the last quarrel, and Miss Hale decided to break off the engagement with one John Wilkes Booth; in order to travel with her father to Spain. It was probably for the better. Yet she never forgot how a man who could say all the right things, could turn around and do such things contrary to what he claimed to believe.

Our Lord found Himself in similar circumstances. Here were people who claimed to love God and said they would do anything for Him and for His temple, and yet lived hypocritical, mean and conniving lives. They used flattery

when it suited their purposes, but just as quickly resorted to name calling when the former did not work. As you probably guessed, it is no compliment to tell someone that he has a devil. What they were really telling Christ was that they believed He was crazy. Crazy, heretic, liar. Not words the average clergyman wants to be called. The Jews are hoping that by heaping enough nasty names on top of Jesus that He will give up, or give in, or at least go away. We see that in modern politics too: racist, extremist, homophobe, radical, communist, et c. Aren't these all terms that are thrown about with the hopes of shutting down the discussion? They are certainly not used to encourage scholarly debate about any issue, regardless of how much either side may claim to believe in freedom of speech. But that is exactly what the Pharisees and Sadducees are doing here. "We'll pretend to be nice while we ask you our question, but then when you don't say what we want to hear, we are going to call you nasty names. And then when you still refuse to relent, we are going to throw rocks at you." I guess we have progressed a little since that time; not in regards to the name calling but I have not been threatened with brute force because of my religious beliefs recently.

Yet Jesus took this name calling and turned it on its head. When the Jews called Him names He said that Abraham, whom they all respected, rejoiced to see Christ's day. The Jews argued that He could not possibly have known Abraham who had been dead for thousands of years. Then Jesus takes a name for Himself that the Jews understood immediately: "Verily, verily", which always precedes something of great importance, "Before Abraham was, I am." You may remember in the Exodus when God was instructing Moses to deliver His people from the hand of Pharaoh, Moses asked, "Whom should I say has sent me?" And God answers, "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." God just is. That is His nature. And there is nothing that you or I or all of the parliaments, Congresses or General Conventions can do to change that. Sometimes we, like the Jews in this passage, get that famous line from Genesis backward and think it says, "And man said, 'Let us make God in our image and likeness.'"

But the Gospel proves it is not new, it has been going on for millennia. Adam and Eve did not listen to the words of God, but followed their own desires. The Pharisees and the Sadducees did the same, as did John Wilkes

Booth and too many thoughtless 21st century residents of this planet. But it is work done in vain. We cannot change God; we must allow Him to change us.

In these last two weeks before the celebration of that great feast of Easter, let us strive to hear God's words for us. Let us open our ears to Him. Christ's instruction to us is very clear: if we do not hear God's words, we are not of Him. In the busy surroundings of this busy yet distracted city, try to carve out some time to hear the words of the Great "I AM". Do not be fooled by those who would lead us astray by putting up a false front. Their voices will sound sweet and melodic, but be not dazzled by their great speech. The simplicity of the Gospel message will pierce their veneer, leaving only the True and Beautiful Faith for us to practice.

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