

**Sermon**

**“A Come-to-Jesus Meeting...with Jesus”**

August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18 and John 6:59-69

**SCRIPTURE:**

**Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18**

<sup>1</sup> Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.

<sup>14</sup> “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. <sup>15</sup> Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” <sup>16</sup> Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; <sup>17</sup> for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; <sup>18</sup> and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” [NRSV]

**John 6:59-69**

<sup>59</sup> He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. <sup>60</sup> When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” <sup>61</sup> But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup> Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup> It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup> But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. <sup>65</sup> And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” <sup>66</sup> Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. <sup>67</sup> So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” <sup>68</sup> Simon Peter

answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup> We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** Once again, startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own, and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds, and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord; and let all God’s people say...Amen.

### It’s Rally Day!

I began a sermon a couple months back by explaining where my mind was at and how I got from there to the sermon that week ... well, here I go again:

For starters, today is Rally Day, which historically for me and the churches I’ve served, it has been a day of embracing the idea of a restart and of a renewal, and of looking down the road toward all that God is doing in our midst. It marks a day on the calendar when both individuals and churches can, in a spiritual sense, experience a reset, a chance to start over; a chance to look ahead and be positive and be hopeful; a chance to learn something new or make a difference or both.

### Annoying Business Jargon

As I’ve planned today’s Rally Day activities that we celebrated earlier in the Fellowship Hall, my mind has been on all these sentiments and feelings and ideas. And, because of a meeting I had this past Wednesday with other interim pastors in the presbytery, my mind has also been on some of my experiences in a very different part of my life ... For six years between finishing seminary and actually working in a church, I worked in the corporate world in the Dallas, Texas, area. And, in those six years I grew, as many people do, to loathe business meetings, especially the ones where some people from the “top” of the business would fly into town to lead a pep-rally of all the local employees. Usually, a huge new idea was about to be rolled out, or rolled down, from the top of the business to the bottom. And, during the presentation the bigwigs didn’t hold back in their use of annoying business jargon.

They would inevitably talk about how much they wanted everyone’s “buy-in,” or agreement on the proposed course of action. Comically, they would sometimes say out loud, “now we don’t just want you to ‘drink the Kool-Aid’ because we say so—believe us, it actually tastes good” because they really just wanted you to adopt certain “best practices” that had been proven successful, and now they wanted

everyone to get on board with a particular new method or technique that would deliver superior results (which translates into more profits). Then, later on in other, smaller meetings with your team or business unit, other annoying business jargon would be used—such as when a discussion might not seem to have a conclusion in sight, the meeting leader would ask that the conversation be “taken offline,” which meant that it would take up even more of your time *after* the meeting, or it would just be put on the backburner for later. And, one of my all-time personal favorite business jargon phrases is “low hanging fruit”—a commonly used metaphor for doing the simplest or easiest work first. I just loved to hear business leaders say that phrase (and it gets said often enough in the church world, too, which it did all too many times in that meeting I mentioned from this past Wednesday 😊)!

### **Come-to-Jesus Meetings**

However, there is one phrase above all others that wasn’t just annoying—it was downright terrifying sometimes (depending on *who* was using the phrase or how much advanced warning you were given). Back in 2013, Forbes magazine ranked this phrase as the most annoying business expression of the year—the “come-to-Jesus moment”—a phrase describing a meeting where your bosses, or your boss’s bosses, would confront the team or business unit over what’s causing poor performance or low productivity. And, the desired outcome of such “come-to-Jesus meetings” (or CTJ) was for employees to realize the truth of the matter, have a new insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, maybe even come clean or admit previous failures, and then acknowledge that it was time to get back to core values again.

Really, in a more general sense, a CTJ could be any moment of realization about something that’s negatively affecting your life or your relationships with other people. It’s an a-ha moment, a moment of reassessing priorities, or any time that marks a turning point or life-changing moment, which is why “come-to-Jesus meetings” find their way into all of life—into our workplaces, our schools, our families, our daily schedules, our habits and routines, our churches, and even in our scriptures.

### **Joshua’s CTJ Meeting With the Tribes of Israel**

In today’s Old Testament reading, Joshua had his own “come-to-Jesus” style meeting with the twelve tribes of Israel. The purpose of the meeting was to remind people—to implore people—to be faithful to God because God had been faithful to

them—through forty years in the wilderness, and then most recently in this story during all the battles and years it took to secure the promised land of Canaan. But, ever since the time that God’s people left Egypt, the temptation to adopt the beliefs and practices of conquered people had been great. And, Joshua wanted the people to have a good “come-to-Jesus moment”—a moment of realization about all the things that were negatively affecting their relationship with the one God. Joshua needed them to experience an a-ha moment, a moment of reassessing their priorities, and a moment that would mark a turning point for God’s people. “Put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord,” and “if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are [now] living.” Joshua had already had *his* a-ha moment, and he declared that he and his family would be serving the Lord. But, how about the rest of them? Then the people also respond, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods ... Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” “... For he is our God”—a confession and affirmation of faith that would become more and more familiar when our same faithful God came and dwelt among us.

### **A Come-to-Jesus Meeting ... with Jesus**

Simon Peter had a similar response after he and the other eleven disciples had their “come-to-Jesus meeting” ... *with Jesus himself* ... in our reading today from John’s gospel. This time in scripture, it wasn’t a series of battles and years of wandering in the desert that lay behind God’s people, bringing them to a crucial decision point about their relationship with God. This time it was just words—the unique and offensive and scandalous words of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God—the *Holy One of God*.

You see, chapter 6 of John’s gospel ends with a bang rather than a whimper. It began with the feeding of the 5,000, but it ends with a defection of followers. Perhaps some of the 5,000 whom Jesus had fed expected to then hear how Jesus would keep them “fat and happy,” proving it has long been a common misconception that Jesus speaks words that make us “happy” or that guarantee material success. But, Jesus never says any such thing. Instead, Jesus asks those who follow him to embrace a new set of priorities (and he uses some difficult words in the mix)—sell all you have,

give the money to the poor, and follow me; hate your mother and father; let the dead bury the dead; take up your cross; welcome the children; touch the lepers; the last shall be first; I desire mercy and not sacrifice; love your enemies—all of them and more, in some way or another, offensive and scandalous ideas and suggestions.

And, let us not forget Jesus' words immediately prior to our reading today that foreshadow the Lord's Supper, and that show just how strange the message of Christian faith really is: eat Christ's body? Drink Christ's blood? With just a few words, Jesus manages to offend other Jews and alienate just about everyone else. Indeed, in story after story, he gathers great crowds everywhere he goes, but little by little, as they listen to his message, they either don't understand or don't like what they hear, and the people turn away until only a few of his closest disciples remain—just *twelve*. [Note: In fact, this is the first time in John's gospel that Jesus' closest disciples are named "the twelve". In contrast to the other gospels, the *twelve* are not all listed by name in John. John identifies only Simon Peter, Judas, and Thomas by name.]

The disappointed hearers of chapter 6 apparently responded with, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" And, you can bet that Jesus knew people were complaining and grumbling like the Israelites in the desert and so he calls them on it. He asks his flock, "Does this offend you?" (In other words, "Do my words offend and scandalize you?" Jesus asks.)

Because pretty quickly in every gospel it becomes clear that God's ways are not our ways. There is a radically *other* orientation required in following Jesus and often (if not always) we'd prefer the world to be about us. The teaching is hard, to be quite sure, but following Jesus is about putting God's ways before our own. According to John, many turn back, but Jesus keeps on with his "come-to-Jesus" meeting and asks disciples then and now, "Do you also wish to go away?" And, this is when Peter reaches his CTJ moment—a moment of realization about his relationship with the one God; *his* a-ha moment, a moment of reassessing his priorities, and a moment that will mark a turning point for Jesus and his disciples. And, Peter confesses, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (or as other ancient translations say, "that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God").

### Are We Scandalized by Jesus?

Jesus asks them that day, "Does this offend you?" It is a question worth asking ourselves over and over. How are we scandalized and offended by Jesus? If the answer is that we aren't, then I think we're not paying enough attention. Because with a pretty quick overview of events, behaviors, and circumstances, both locally and around the world, it becomes clear that in a very real sense, our ways are definitely not God's ways. There is a radically other orientation required in following Jesus, and as I said earlier, often (if not always) we'd prefer the world to be about us. The teaching of Jesus is hard. It is difficult. It is offensive. It is scandalous. The path to resurrection victory goes inescapably through the suffering of the cross and the grief of the grave. But, all that offends also saves, and following Jesus is about putting God's ways before our own. According to John, many turned back. Sadly, many still do.

So on this Rally Day—on this day of embracing the idea of a restart and of a renewal and of looking down the road toward all that God is doing in our midst and of whom God is calling to lead us—let us ask ourselves: Are we on board with Jesus? Are we really all in? Do we truly believe that Jesus Christ is the Holy One of God, and if so, do we live like it? This is a week where our scripture readings implore us to renew our commitment to Jesus the Christ—to have our own “come-to-Jesus” moment. William Barclay once said, “In the last analysis, Christianity is not a philosophy which we accept, nor a theory to which we give allegiance. It is a personal response to Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Well, then let us respond as the people did to Joshua—that “we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” And, let us respond as Peter did to Jesus—declaring with our whole being that “we have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” And, then ... let us live like it!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William. The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume I. WJKP: Louisville, p.268.