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I Am Everything

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John 8:31-59

[True Disciples]

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸ I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father."

[Jesus and Abraham]

³⁹ They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are indeed doing what your father does." They said to him, "We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself." ⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. ⁴⁴ You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God."

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and

he is the judge. ⁵¹ *Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.* ⁵² *The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.'* ⁵³ *Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?"* ⁵⁴ *Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, 'He is our God,'* ⁵⁵ *though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word.* ⁵⁶ *Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad."* ⁵⁷ *Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"* ⁵⁸ *Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am."* ⁵⁹ *So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.*

In John chapters 7 and 8, Jesus is in a protracted fight with religious Jews who supposedly believe in him – which is not to say they were his disciples. I'm not sure what they were, exactly. The opposite side of the aisle maybe. Men ideally trying to work with Jesus... but they just cannot get there. Jesus and the Jews insult each other repeatedly. He suggests their scholars are stupid. He calls them **Satan**. He calls them **murderers** and **Haters of God**.

They call him a **Samaritan** – which doesn't sound like much to us, but was a real cut to a full-blooded, devout Jew. The comparable modern words I'm not going to say here. They call him **demon-possessed**. "If I am, so are you!" Jesus essentially says in 9:52, "and while you are possessed by demons, I myself will never die." For the life of them they could not think of a reason to let him keep talking. He was clearly insane.

Verse 58: ***"Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I Am."***

This kind of talk has a clinical diagnosis: delusions of grandeur – unless, of course, one really is God. We know this language – I AM. "I AM" was God explaining God's self to Moses, remember? These Jews might have gotten along with Jesus, had Jesus met them even half-way, had he appreciated the prudence of placating Rome whenever and wherever possible. This was festival season, after all. Rome was on higher alert than usual. Israel hardly needed country rabble-rousers stirring up crowds in Jerusalem. They – the Jewish authorities in charge of keeping Rome happy enough to let them have some religious autonomy – found themselves with three choices:

- Change Jesus;
- Change themselves;
- Silence Jesus by force.

In the whole history of the Christian gospel, only one of those options has ever worked. They want him to change: to change/soften/moderate his message. Jesus refuses. Jesus

insists on framing his presentation of the relationship between humans and God as the difference between being the slave and being the child of a master. They claim to be children of Abraham, and thus free. But if being Abraham's child forbids them to consider God in any new light, are they not therefore enslaved?

Of course this is all crazy talk to them. As they see it, on the subject of Abraham there wasn't anything TO discuss. That was established Jewish theology – not open to change. Jesus says if they cling to their understanding of Abraham, they will never understand what he has come to say.

But they are not the only people listening. Also listening was the early church to whom John was writing, a church trying to figure out how to welcome Gentiles into full fellowship and stay together as one body. They were facing the same trifecta of choices:

- Change the gospel message;
- Change themselves;
- Or, silence the very gospel they sought to preach by their life together.

And so it goes, the constant quest of discipleship – to follow Jesus as he leads us places we never imagined faith would have us go. By “places” I don't mean geography; I mean **personally** and **constitutionally**. How we view the world and other people. How we think and behave. What we believe.

Meeting Jesus changes people, personally and constitutionally. The larger question being argued and settled between Jesus and his opponents was “Who Am I?”

“I Am Everything!” was Jesus’s answer. Those trying to believe in him needed him to change that answer if they were to believe.

Change him.

Change themselves.

Or shut him up.

They couldn't change him. They wouldn't change themselves. They tried to shush him.

Meeting Jesus changes us. Sticking with Jesus changes us again. And again and again and again for the rest of our lives, hopefully. So much so that if we stick with Jesus long enough, we will find ourselves strangers to the person we were before we knew Christ. And different, hopefully, than we were ten and twenty years ago.

When my darling friend came out to her Southern Baptist parents as gay, this child upon whose faith they had bragged and prided themselves for 24 years was all at once, in their mind, hell-bound. And they told her so. Repeatedly. Because the faith they'd carried for 40 years did not include the possibility of being gay and being Christian, any more than the faith of Jewish Christians in Jesus's time included the possibility of Jews and Gentiles worshipping together.

This is a zero-sum faith construct: you can keep your faith – in which case your daughter is hell-bound; or accept that your daughter is Christian, thereby forfeiting your own faith – in which case **you** are hell-bound. Solution: maintain limited contact with, while withdrawing all approval and affection from, your child. Then pray for her to repent, for the next 24 years. Skip her wedding and forbid her wife to visit your home. Invite her but not her family to family events such as reunions and weddings. Acknowledge but do not ever pick up, love on, or touch those four babies who are legally your grandchildren but only know you from pictures.

My friend's wife also grew up Baptist. When she told her parents she was gay, they were surprised and sad. When they told their church friends, their friends treated them like their child had died. They never went back to that church again and are Presbyterian now. They paid for the wedding. They are grandma and grandpa to those four kids. The grandpa said that when his girl told him she was gay, he had three really hard weeks. "I prayed about it and then I knew she was my same girl she'd always been – the girl God gave me – and my job is to be her daddy no matter what. She is perfect and I am so proud of her." His girl is a home-owning, tax-paying, church-going high school science teacher and a mom and a wife.

The thing is, Friends, the two sets of parents came from the same faith construct, but were so different in it. For one, faith was very strong but also brittle. Big. And breakable. A faith to be respected, feared, obeyed and strictly maintained as is and at all costs. Such faith gets explained or justified in the language of sacrifice and suffering. I've no doubt my friend's parents are much admired for the cross they've carried all these years in not giving in to the temptation to accept their daughter's sinful lifestyle, thereby suggesting to her that she is not in danger of judgment. While for the other, faith turned out to be very strong. But also supple. Still big. But not always clear and evident in every detail. But with plenty more room for faith while at the same time not knowing every detail. Big enough to contain all different ways of being human that have nothing to do with being Christian. Because being a human is the only condition for faith in Jesus. This faith is bigger than the courage required to break from faith communities who expect a brother to abandon his child in the name of Christ. Emotional abandonment is still abandonment.

The religious Jews couldn't change Jesus. They wouldn't change themselves. So they killed him – and failed to shut him up after all. Because he was and is the God "**I AM.**"

"I AM Everything."

He rose. The church got the spirit and the gospel spread. A good number of the folks who believed it ended up finding that same gospel annoying. One of our Chinese women says, "Oh, that is so 'annoising,'" which I think is a fabulous word! The gospel got "annoising" to the very people who believed it, when it wanted them to change too.

Include these Gentiles, the gospel said. And these women. And these really poor people. Oh, and also, **these Romans** – you know, the ones who oppress you all the time. Them too. And when you can't figure out how to love a person, imagine how you'd want to be loved if you were them, and do that.

They tried – as hard as people can, I expect. But eventually Jews drifted out of Christian faith and now it's mostly just us Gentiles – which isn't to say the problem got solved. Turns out the difficulty wasn't **Jewish** after all but **human** – this impulse to take this supple faith and make it hard and fast, as if to last forever just the way it is right now. As if our rendering of the gospel here and now is how the gospel always was and shall always be.

Another of my favorite moments at the Shattered Masks event was Laura Beth talking about this church she attended in Texas that was full of people in recovery and how so many of the people vaped during worship, and my instant thought – INSTANT! – was, “No way are we EVER having people vape during worship.” And I laughed inside at myself – AT THE PROGRAM TO SHOW OFF HOW PROGRESSIVE and OPEN-MINDED MY CHURCH IS, I’M ALREADY MAKING PLANS FOR WHO WILL ABSOLUTELY NOT BE WELCOME IN OUR SERVICE!!!!

All of which is to say that so long as we are breathing we are never done with faith, that God is always going to pull us into deeper water to see what faith we are made of, to take us places we never thought we’d go.

For so, so, so, so, so, so long I thought faith was hanging on and climbing higher without letting go, that believing was like working out. But faith is letting go, Friends, letting go and falling into whatever future comes our way. Believing that the God who promised to stay with us forever keeps that promise for all time. And then longer.

You can't change me. You can't quiet me. I am everything, Jesus says, ***Let me help you change yourself.***

Would you pray with me?