

May 22, 2016

John 8:48-59: ***“Before Abraham Was”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

More and more it seems that when you ask someone if they have a church home, or if they hold to a particular religion, or if you ask what they specifically believe about God, they will answer by saying that they are “spiritual.” It is a magnificent way to deflect any deep inquiry into definite beliefs, while giving the impression of profound sensitivity to what may be labeled as “wisdom.” It tries to avoid absolutes. It communicates toleration of everything except for that which is deemed intolerant. Saying that you are spiritual is the first attempt at nicely saying, “I am not going to directly answer your question, but I want you to know that I am an extremely sensitive and good person. I believe in something. And, it really doesn’t matter what you believe in as long as you believe.”

In a blog that appeared in *The Huffington Post* on December 21, 2015 under the title: *What Does It Mean to Be A Spiritual Person?* - Dr. Margaret Paul writes:

Being a spiritual person is synonymous with being a person whose highest priority is to be loving to yourself and others. A spiritual person cares about people, animals and the planet. A spiritual person knows that we are all One, and consciously attempts to honor this Oneness. A spiritual person is a kind person . . . If you want to be a spiritual person, then let kindness be your guiding light . . . Recognize that we all have the spark of love that is God within us, and learn to honor that love so that you can know and experience the Oneness of all that is.

Scattered throughout the article, she clarifies her definition of true religion and spirituality by stating the negative. If you are not conscious of what is loving in your thoughts and actions, if you are judgmental toward yourself and others, if you are not operating from your heart but in a learned dogma of your mind, then this would indicate that you are not truly religious or spiritual. Okay then! How does one define loving in thoughts and actions? Is there any judgment that would maintain a difference between right and wrong, good and bad, truth and error, as it relates to myself and others? How does one operate solely from the heart without anything known or learned in the mind? And finally, what is love, who is God, what is his will for us, and how does that connect us to what she calls “the Oneness of all that is?”

Perhaps I should read Dr. Margaret Paul’s books, watch her videos, and seek her every counsel for the answers to these questions. Then again, perhaps “the spark of love that is God within,” as she puts it, will help me. And yet, what am I to do when the spark of love that is God within me contradicts the spark of love that is God within her, and others for that matter? What a mess!

As you can see, all of this is a far cry from what we read in the Proverbs about seeking true wisdom, “And now, O sons, listen to me: blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death (Proverbs 8:32-36).” The Bible teaches that we are to listen to wisdom and not to the supposed “spark of love that is God within us.” We are bid to find the answer

outside of ourselves and in the goodness of the one who is great. In fact, the great one is the difference between life and death. All who hate wisdom, love death. So, who is this wisdom? Paul makes it abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 1:12-14, "but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Furthermore, our Gospel lesson absolutely shatters all self-worth, good works, the supposed spark of love that is God within, and any idea of personal strength or power - Yes - every form of self-reliance imaginable - all shattered when Jesus simply says, "before Abraham was, I am."

That is quite a statement that Jesus makes. Without all of the Greek grammar that goes along with it, Jesus is marking a point of time when Abraham came into existence. Before this point, Abraham did not exist - he was not. When Jesus says "I am," he is emphatically stating existence for himself with absolutely no point of beginning at all. Consequently, Jesus is testifying to the divine, eternal pre-existence of his person. Finally, without Jesus, there is no Abraham - there is no us!

You see, popular religion and spirituality is always about our attempt to find God, or our attempt to somehow get God involved in our existence by getting him to answer or do things for us. The truth, in which Jesus is stating, is that religion and spirituality does not start with us and is never fulfilled by us. In short, we are to understand this about ourselves - there is a before me - and apart from the one before me, I am nothing and have nothing. We are not "I am," as Jesus is. Again, religion and spirituality does not start or become fulfilled by us as we might like to think. Rather, it all starts and is fulfilled only in Him. It is outside of ourselves. It is no wonder then that the Pharisees, who thought that they were very religious, spiritual, good, and saved by their goodness, promptly picked up stones to throw at Jesus. Their religion and spirituality had no place for the person and work of "I am."

Now, here is "the real kicker:" true religion and spirituality is NOT about getting God involved in our lives, but it is about God getting us involved in HIS life! A point in time does not define eternity, but eternity defines every point in time. That turns everything upside down. It reminds us that He is uncreated absolute and undivided good, and whatever good we are or have comes from Him. With that truth in mind, we are brought to our knees. No longer is it about who we are, what we are going to do, nor is it about our opinions, but it is completely about Him, what He graciously does for us, and what He finally says. The things of God never start with us. Rather, they always start with God and bring us to Him. "Before Abraham was, I am!" Jesus says.

And that brings us to Holy Trinity Sunday. When Jesus says that he is "I am," we are to understand that this Jesus of Nazareth, who stands before us in the flesh, is the creator of the universe. As John writes, "the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us." This is God of very God. This is the Son of God who is to be embraced as the Word of the Father. And then the question hits: why is he here and why was it necessary for him to become one of us? Astonishing as it is, He has something to say, something to do, something to reveal. He is connecting with us on a level that people frequently demand, but fail to acknowledge has happened. He is the answer to the complaint: "if God would only talk to me." The fourth Gospel says, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (John 1:18)."

And why is he here? John the Baptist tells us explicitly when he bears witness that Jesus is indeed the Son of the Father and the Savior of the world. The Bible tells us, "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel (John 1:29-31)." Now isn't that amazing that John the Baptist would talk about the one before him even though Jesus was conceived and born after him (Luke 1). John knows that this is the "I am" and he wants us to know why he is here. He has come to sacrifice himself to take away the sin of the world.

The Father gave his everything that we might have what is. The Word became flesh to live a perfect life for us and to die for all of our sins that he might breathe the Spirit of Life into us that we might live and thereby see God face to face. There is a destination that is beyond this place. There is a truly religious and spiritual objective. And, if we see God face to face, then we have him and everything that is, ever has been, or ever will be so that the one who is "I am" permeates and penetrates our lives. It is the design of our maker that we would be His eternal companion in everything. This salvation is of the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. And the Athanasian Creed is right when it blasts all false religion and shallow spirituality when it says, "whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved."

It really matters that we rightly know who God is and believe in him and his will for us. It certainly matters when death is staring us in the face. It matters when the trials and troubles of this messed up place attempt to drag us down. It matters when the devil does nothing but attempt to flood our minds with every false sense of security that ignorance is okay, which he later turns into every sort of accusation that becomes the raging fires of hell.

The one who says, "before Abraham was, I am" is here for us and sits at the right hand of the Father saying good things about us and working all things that we might be forever with him. It is not enough to think you are "spiritual" or "religious," nor is it enough to simply say that you believe in something and it doesn't matter what you believe in so long as you believe in something. As Jesus says in our Gospel lesson, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." And if people think that we are nuts for keeping his word, then so be it!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott