

**“Father and Son: Who Can Know the Mind of God?”**

**John 5:16-29**

**September 1, 2019**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**

*Pr. Nicoletti*

It is good to be back with you all and in the pulpit this morning. And it is good to return again with you to John’s Gospel.

It’s been six weeks since we looked together at John chapter five, verses one through seventeen, and so as we look to the next passage, some orientation on the immediate context might be helpful.

In verses one through nine of John chapter five, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath. Then in verses ten and following, a controversy ensues. The religious leaders among the Jews first go after the man who was healed, because he was carrying his mat on the Sabbath – something Jesus had commanded him to do when he healed him, though the religious leaders at the time had forbid it. But then the leaders attention turns to Jesus himself, for performing such a healing on the Sabbath in the first place.

Now, in the Gospels, when Jesus is accused of breaking the Sabbath, his responses fall under two general categories. The first is that he responds that his opponents have fundamentally misunderstood the Sabbath and the Sabbath command, and that if they understood it rightly, they would see that his actions were not only permissible under the Sabbath commandment, but that they captured *the heart* of the Sabbath commandment. That is one category of responses that Jesus gives.

But the second category of responses Jesus gives is rooted in Jesus’s identity as the Son of God. [Brown, 216]

Back in July we considered that first category of response – the need to rightly understand the heart of the Sabbath command. And then, having established that, we linked it to the second response – the kind of rest that Jesus gives us *as God the Son*, when we, his people, worship on the Sabbath.

All of that has already come up in John chapter five. And now, having opened up the topic of his identity, in our text this morning Jesus dives deeper into what that means. What begins as a discussion on the Sabbath turns to a deeper conversation about who Jesus is, and what it means for us.

That is the framework within which we come to our text this morning.

And so, with that in mind, please do listen carefully, as we turn to John chapter five, verses sixteen through twenty-nine, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

<sup>5:16</sup> And this [meaning the healings he was performing] was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

<sup>18</sup> This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

<sup>19</sup> So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. <sup>20</sup> For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. <sup>21</sup> For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. <sup>22</sup> For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, <sup>23</sup> that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. <sup>24</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

<sup>25</sup> “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. <sup>26</sup> For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. <sup>27</sup> And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup> Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice <sup>29</sup> and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

This is the word of the Lord.

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, as the psalmist says, we know that those who walk in the ways of your word are blessed – those who keep your testimonies and seek you with their whole heart.

Lord, make our ways steadfast in keeping your statutes.

Keep us from dishonoring your name, by fixing our eyes now on your word.

Teach us the way of righteousness, so that we might praise you with upright hearts,

Grant this for Jesus’s sake. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:1-2, 5-7]

Our text this morning records the growing conflict between Jesus and the first-century Jewish religious leaders ... and as we read it, the intensity of that conflict should strike us.

We read in verse eighteen that because of what he had said and done, the Jewish leaders were now “seeking all the more to kill him.”

It’s chapter five of John’s Gospel ... and already the Jewish leaders are trying to kill Jesus.

And what has he done to provoke them? We read that in the rest of the verse – John tells is in verse eighteen: “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

It is the kind of relationship that Jesus claims to have with God the Father that makes the religious leaders murderously angry with him.

And what kind of relationship does Jesus claim to have? As we read in the verses that follow, the picture that emerges is a relationship of “great personal intimacy.” It is a relationship of “unusual familiarity.” It’s a relationship that is unique from the kind of relationship any other human being can claim with God – a relationship that is exclusively for Jesus, and which Jesus says he enjoys because he alone is God’s Son. [Letham, 39]

*In short, Jesus here claims that as God’s Son he has a relationship with God the Father that is unique, exclusive, and of great personal intimacy and unusual familiarity.*

And what made this so provocative?

Well, a few things. But key among them was that to many of the Jews of first-century Palestine ... God was a distant figure ... he was high, and holy, and glorious ... and so Jesus’s claim to have a relationship with God the Father that is unique, exclusive, and of great personal intimacy and unusual familiarity, was both highly implausible and also deeply offensive.

That was what many in their culture believed about God, and why many found the words of Jesus so distressing and offensive – a form of blasphemy, really.

And as is so often the case ... our culture is both different ... and not so different ... from the culture we find in our text.

As a culture, we do *not* view God as so holy and glorious that we fear blasphemy by describing over-familiarity with him – as the first-century Jews did. That is not our problem. Yet ... even so, we still share their sense of disconnection from God. Our culture would still find a claim that someone has a relationship with God that is unique, exclusive, and of great personal intimacy to be implausible and even offensive (if it was taken seriously) ... not because God is too holy for such a thing (in our minds) ... but rather because he is too absent and distant for such a thing.

As I was thinking about this this week, I was struck by how this theme comes up again and again in many of the popular stories in our culture right now.

We live in a culture of fractured and splintered religious perspectives, but we can still often find themes that resonate across our culture, and as James Smith has pointed out, *one of the best ways to discover what a culture believes is to look at the kind of stories they tell.*

And as we think of the stories our culture is telling about God right now, some common themes emerge.

A few examples came to mind for me, but I’ll make a few disclaimers before turning them to. First, please do not take my mention of these stories as a recommendation for you or your family to watch them. I bring them up to help us exegete our culture’s worldview, not to give you suggestions for a good Netflix queue for you or your family. Second, I have not seen each of these shows or movies I’ll mention – some things I have just read about. And third, I’m not necessarily bringing up these stories to condemn them either, but for us to consider them as pieces of evidence on our culture’s view of God. Some Christians have condemned these stories, others have argued they are not really an attack on Biblical Christianity itself ... but that discussion is not my main interest this morning.

So ... that all said, what do I have in mind?

In May the miniseries *Good Omens* was released on Amazon Prime. It's been fairly popular. The show tells the story of an angel and a demon working together to try to prevent the apocalypse. The popularity of the show reflects a general interest in spiritual things, we might say, and has a cast of characters who play angels and demons, all of whom are portrayed as active in the world we live in. But despite all the spiritual activity depicted ... we do not see God at work. As one reviewer put it: "A version of the Christian God exists in this imagined world, albeit in the form of a distant, unknowable, disembodied Narrator. [...] No one communes with the Divine in *Good Omens*." [Matt Poppe]

This is an example of a fantastical comedy, but the idea is in more serious works as well.

The play *Angels in America*, which premiered in 1991, won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award, and was adapted into an HBO mini-series in 2003, tells a story of spiritual reality in which God has abandoned earth and heaven, and the world is now run by an angelic council. God is distant and absent, and towards the end of the play the main character declares to the angelic council that God has left, that he is *not* coming back, and even if he did, they should refuse to receive him back. The man's parting words to the council are: "And if he returns, take him to court. He walked out on us. He ought to pay." [*Angels in America*, "Perestroika: Heaven, I'm in Heaven"]

If these two stories show this idea from the perspective of heaven, Paul Schrader's film *First Reformed*, starring Ethan Hawke as a distressed and tortured pastor shows the same idea from the perspective of earth. In the film, Reverend Toller struggles with his faith. He struggles with, among other things, what he can know or believe. And so when a congregant asks him directly "Can God forgive us for what we've done to this world?" ... his answer is to shake his head in uncertainty and say: "Who can know the mind of God?" ... and then to urge his congregant to focus on living a good life.

Now what's interesting in that scene is that Reverend Toller is quoting Scripture in that response – he's quoting Romans 11:34, which is itself pointing back to Isaiah 40:13.

Reverend Toller is quoting the Apostle Paul ... but he means something very different from what the Apostle Paul meant. The Apostle Paul meant that God's ways of ordering history are beyond our finding out, and his wisdom and grace are beyond our comprehension, and so no one can stand above him and claim to give him advice. The very next line in Isaiah 40 and quoted by the Apostle Paul brings this out, where he asks: Who has been God's counselor? *Paul's* point is that God's wisdom and love are greater than ours, and his ordering of history beyond our comprehension.

But in the mouth of Reverend Toller the same phrase seems to instead say that we cannot really know what God thinks, or what he will do, or what he wants us to do. In the mouth of the Reverend Toller, the same words speak not of God's wisdom and love, but of God's distance and detachment. For Reverend Toller "*Who can know the mind of God?*" is not a question that leads to worship, as it does for the Apostle Paul, but it is instead a question of quiet despair.

And I think it is Reverend Toller's version of the question that reflects the feelings of our culture towards God far more than the Apostle Paul's version of it.

And so ... in an odd way, our culture finds someone's claim to have an exclusive and unique relationship of personal intimacy and familiarity with God to be offensive – just as the first century Jews did ... but for very different reasons. For them, God was far too holy for a human being to claim such a close relationship with him. Such claims were therefore heresy.

But for most people in our culture today ... God is far too distant and absent for a human being to seriously claim a close relationship of exclusive and unique personal intimacy with him. In their own way such claims are a form of heresy in our culture as well.

And we see this again and again. When religious people make claims about God, the response of many is some variation on the incredulous question “Who can know the mind of God?” When they claim that God is against or for some act or practice, the response of many is to scoff, and say something like “Yeah, and how do *you* know what God likes and dislikes.” When religious believers make claims about what God has done or what he is like, the response is “What exactly makes *you* such an expert about God?” In one way or another, whether spoken or unspoken, when specific claims are made about God, our culture’s response, more and more, is to ask: “Who can know the mind of God?”

And since the implied answer is “No one” ... such claims made by religious believers are therefore not truth claims, but are instead perceived as power plays. And they are treated as such.

And as the question is repeated in various forms in our culture, Christians themselves can wonder at it as well. As they read, or listen to, or are friends with or family members to people who are smarter than they are, but who believe fundamentally different things about God ... it’s easy to begin to struggle with doubt. It’s easy to say to yourself ... “*They* are so much smarter than I am ... and if they claim they cannot know what God is like ... then how can *I* know? Who am *I* to make such a claim?”

In our own culture, just as in first-century Palestine ... God is a distant figure from us ... and so Jesus’s claim to have a relationship with God the Father that is unique, exclusive, and of great personal intimacy and unusual familiarity, sounds both implausible and offensive.

In our text this morning, Jesus’s response to that objection is that as God’s Son, it is through *him* that God the Father has drawn close.

Jesus’s response in our text, in other words, is that we are *wrong* to believe that God is so distant, because in *him*, in Jesus Christ, God the Father has drawn close to us, through his Son.

And Jesus draws out three aspects of this.

First, he tells us that God the Father has *revealed himself* through Christ, his Son.

Second, he tells us that God the Father has *reached out to us* through Christ, his Son.

And third, he tells us that God the Father will *hold us responsible for our response*, through Christ, his Son.

Jesus tells us that God the Father:

- has revealed himself,
  - has reached out to us,
  - and will hold us responsible for our response,
- and he does all of this through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let’s consider each of those together.

First, Jesus tells us that God the Father has *revealed himself* through Christ, his Son.

“Who can know the mind of God?” our culture asks.

Jesus’s answer is simple: The Son of God, and in some significant ways, anyone who listens to the Son.

Take a look again at verses nineteen and twenty. We read: “So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel’”

There is a progression here – Jesus says that the Father reveals to the Son who the Father is and what the Father does, and then Jesus the Son in turn reveals those same things to all those who hear his teaching and observe his actions.

Jesus, in a sense, tells us that when it comes to revealing the Father to us, Jesus will tell us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Or, more specifically, he tells us that he reveals to us *what* the Father does, *all that* the Father does, and *nothing but* what the Father does.

All three elements are spelled out, actually.

In verse 19 Jesus says “Whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” – When we see Jesus, we see *what* the Father does.

In verse twenty we read that “the Father [...] shows [the Son] *all* that he himself is doing” and combined with verse 19 (which tells us that the Son then does what he sees the Father do), that means that when we see Jesus we see *all that* the Father does.

And at the beginning of verse nineteen we read “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but *only* what he sees the Father doing.” When we look at Jesus, in some sense, we see *nothing but* the kind of things that the Father does.

Jesus Christ is telling us that in his words and deeds, the Father has revealed himself to us, because in Jesus Christ we see *what* the Father does, *all that* the Father does, and *nothing but* the kind of things that the Father does.

Who can know the mind of God the Father? The Son, and all who hear the Son’s words and observe the Son’s deeds.

And the Apostle John, in writing his Gospel, would emphatically say that that includes *you* now. That circle of people who have received the revelation of Jesus, the Son, is not a group locked up in the past – it’s not a circle limited to those who observed Jesus with their own eyes and heard his words directly from his own lips. It’s not a privilege for those who happened to live in Palestine in the first century. Jesus sent his Apostles out, to tell others of his words, and his deeds, and his kingdom, and the Apostle John fulfilled that commission in part by writing this Gospel that we have in our hands and have heard from this morning.

We *have* heard the words and considered the deeds of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, and so, God the Father *has* revealed himself *to us* in Christ.

Let me briefly mention three implications of this.

First, regardless of what questions you still may have, regardless of what doubts you still may struggle with, if you can hear my voice this morning, then God the Father has revealed himself to *you* and so *you* are responsible for how you respond to his revelation.

I'll say more on this in a few minutes, but we should begin to consider it now. There are important questions that are worth discussing regarding those who have never heard of Jesus or his gospel. And the Bible addresses those questions elsewhere. But to run to those questions right now is something of a cop-out. Because as important as the answers to those questions are, they do not apply to you. Because *you have heard*. To you the Father *has* revealed himself. Whether again and again throughout the course of your life, or whether it has only been over the course of the last hour, *you* have heard the words of Jesus, *you* have heard of his works. Some portion – whether great or small – of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ has been shown to you, and through those words and deeds God the Father has revealed himself to you. Because, once again, in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, we see *what* the Father does, *all that* the Father does, and *nothing but* the kind of things that the Father does. The Father has revealed himself to *you*. *You* must respond.

That's the first implication of this.

The second is that this gives us grounds for confidence in the face of doubt. When others ask us how we could possibly know the mind of God, or when we read a book by a non-believer who is clearly more intelligent than we are, or when we talk with or think about the friend or family member who is so much smarter than us, but still does not think that anyone can know the character or the thoughts of God – and we ask ourselves: “Who are *we* to claim to know such things? What gives *us* the arrogance to say that we know what God is like – that we know what God does and what he likes and what he dislikes?” Jesus here gives us confidence in our answer, because we realize that our answer is not based on human wit, but on witness.

I got a chance to read some Father Brown stories over vacation. Father Brown is the priest and amateur detective created by G. K. Chesterton. And reading those stories was a lot of fun. And one thing I noticed was a pattern that is common to many different detective stories I think, which brings out the distinction between theory and witness. It's not uncommon in such stories, as the main character, an amateur detective, finds himself roped into helping to solve a crime, that some other detective, often a professional detective, is also present – and they may even be a professional detective who is known for their great intelligence. And this highly intelligent professional detective comes to the scene of the crime, looks at the evidence, and begins to come up with a grand theory of what happened, and how the crime was committed. And as the theory is laid out, it seems great, and grand, and there's a beauty to it, and it begins to seem obvious to everyone around that this *must be* the right explanation of what happened. But then the main character, whether Father Brown or someone else, rather than jumping to such a theory, begins looking for a witness to some aspect of the crime. And when he finds one, such a witness will in a few words demolish the theory of the intelligent professional detective – regardless of the intelligence level of the witness. As genius as the theory was, new information from the witness shows that that's not *actually* what happened.

There are many theories around us about this world we live in – about what this world is, about what a human being is, about whether there is a God, and if so what we should think of him. Some of those theories are nothing short of genius in the way they are constructed. They can be

striking. They can seem beautiful and elegant in how they tie the evidence together. And we can be captivated by them. And we can begin to doubt the Christian faith.

But the Christian faith does not claim to be another theory. It doesn't claim to be one theory among many, but in the end the most intelligent and clever and complete theory of them all. Christianity claims to be a *witness*. Christianity's whole basis depends on witness. Christianity's claim is that God the Father has revealed himself to Jesus Christ his Son – and God the Son has witnessed, from all eternity, who God the Father is. And then Jesus Christ, God the Son, has come to us as a faithful witness, and has revealed both himself and God the Father to us through his words and deeds. The words of Jesus recorded in Scripture, and the deeds of Jesus recorded in Scripture, are like the words of a witness that come and smash even the most eloquent and intelligent theories of God and the world that the human mind could come up with.

When you know that those who hold or propose alternative theories and beliefs about God and the world – when you know that such people are smarter than you are, your hope, ultimately, should not be in finding another really smart Christian to point to as a counter-example. Your hope, ultimately, should not be in trying to prove your own intelligence. Instead, your hope should be rooted in the fact that God the Father has revealed himself to Jesus Christ his Son, who has been a faithful witness, and has in turn revealed himself and the Father to you and to me. And that witness has come to us with the help of God the Holy Spirit ... who is not mentioned here, but will be discussed more later on in John's Gospel.

Our confidence lies in the role of witness. *That's* the second implication.

The third implication is that God the Father is *not* cold and distant. It is an all-too-common tendency for Christians to contrast the Father and the Son – to see the Son as warm, and loving, and full of grace and compassion for his people, while seeing the Father as cold, and distant, and primarily a Judge for his people. But Jesus has just told us that whatever we see in him, he has seen in the Father. Jesus's love and warmth both reflect and in some way make present to us the warmth and love of God the Father. Jesus's grace and compassion for his people are a reflection and truly make present the grace and compassion of God the Father for his people.

Take some time and consider how you think of Jesus Christ, and how you think of God the Father. If their character traits seem to contrast in your mind, then you have not rightly understood or believed Jesus's words for you here in our passage this morning.

So, the first thing Jesus tells us is that God the Father has *revealed himself* to us through Jesus Christ, his Son – that in the words and deeds of Jesus we see *what* the Father does, *all that* the Father does, and *nothing but* the kind of things that the Father does.

That's the first thing – the Father has *revealed himself* to us through Jesus Christ, his Son.

The second thing Jesus has to tell us is that God the Father has *reached out to us* through Christ, his Son.

In other words, this information, this witness, this revelation, is not passed on to us haphazardly or just so that we can reflect on it.

Instead, Jesus indicates that God the Father has *actively* sent this revelation to us, and he has done it with a *relational intention*.

First, God the Father has *actively* sent this revelation to us. In other words, Jesus, God the Son, did not receive the Father's self-disclosure from all eternity and then decide on his own it'd be nice to share it with humanity. In verse twenty-four Jesus tells us that he was "*sent*" by God the Father. God the Father actively sent Jesus Christ his Son to you and to me.

And then along with that, Jesus tells us that the Father sent him with a *relational intention*. He sent him not just so we would be well-informed citizens of his creation, but so that we might *know* him, and relate to him rightly, both now and for eternity. In verse twenty we read that the Father is revealing himself, so that we might "marvel." In verse twenty-three we read that our marveling should lead us to honor both the Father and the Son – in other words, it should lead us to relate to them rightly. And in verse twenty-one and twenty-five through twenty-nine we read that the Father's desire is that those who receive this revelation and relate to him rightly, would be with him, in a right relationship to him, for all eternity.

The revelation of the Father that we receive through Jesus is not merely interesting information. It is an act of God the Father lovingly reaching out to us, his creatures, that we might know him, that we might honor and love him, and that we might spend all eternity with him.

So, first God the Father has *revealed* himself to us through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Second, God the Father has *lovingly reached out to us* through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Third and finally, in this text Jesus tells us that God the Father will *hold us responsible for our response*, through Jesus Christ, his Son.

If God the Father has revealed himself to us, if he has done it in order to call us into a right relationship with him, then there are consequences for how we respond to that revelation and call. And Jesus is a part of that as well.

We said a few moments ago that the warmth and love we so often ascribe to the Son is fully present in God the Father. But Jesus tells us here that it is also true that the justice and judgment we so often ascribe to God the Father also is fully present in God the Son.

In verse twenty-two we have read that God the Father has given judgment of humanity to the Son. We have read in verse twenty-three that the Father's desire for us is that we honor and rightly relate to him and to Jesus Christ his Son. And then Jesus describes the result of that in verses twenty-five through twenty-nine. Jesus says: <sup>25</sup>"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. <sup>26</sup>For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. <sup>27</sup>And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup>Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice <sup>29</sup>and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."

God the Father has sent his eternal Son to his people – to we who have rebelled against him by disobeying his calling for us. He has sent his Son to rescue us – to die on the cross and so pay the penalty for our sin ... and he has sent his Son to reveal himself to us – to reach out to us and show us who he is. And with that held out before us we must respond. And our response will have eternal implications.

Will we honor the Father and the Son, or will we dishonor them?

Will we accept the testimony of Jesus Christ the Son about who God is and what he does and what he wants us to do, or will we reject and dishonor his testimony and trust our own theories instead?

Will we receive the grace offered to us by the Father through the Son, and confess our sins and receive his grace, or will we reject and dishonor that offer by either denying that we need forgiveness, or that we can obtain forgiveness through him?

Will we receive God's commands and strive to live our life according to them – will we honor God the Father and the Son as our king and pledge lives of loyalty and faithfulness to them (imperfect as our loyalty and faithfulness will surely be) ... or will we demand that we decide how we will live and order our lives?

Jesus tells us that life and death are held before us, and we must choose. The result of our response will reverberate down the course of our lives for eternity. Those who trust in and honor the Father and the Son will hear and live, not just now, but on the last day, when Jesus will raise them from the dead to a resurrection of life, with God for eternity. And those who reject and dishonor the Father and the Son will, through their own choice, be abandoned to eternity apart from God – to the cold and isolating hell of separation from God – to the resurrection of judgment, forever.

Jesus holds life and death before us. He holds fellowship with God and alienation from God before us. He holds trust in his witness and revelation and trust in our own wit and theories before us.

Choose the witness of Jesus. Choose fellowship with God. Choose eternal life.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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