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John 8:37-59

Twenty-seventh Message

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FAMILY TIES

Seven years ago this week, my nephew called in the middle of the night to say that my brother had been killed in an automobile accident. I still can remember the wave of shock and disbelief that swept over me in the early hours of February 21st, 1999. I had already lost my father and mother, and now I had lost a brother. My family of five is now but two: myself and another brother, a pastor living in Nebraska.

Larry was the oldest, biggest, toughest, strongest, and the craziest of the family. A weight lifter, he competed in the Olympic trials in 1972 and staged the weight lifting competition at the games in Atlanta in 1996. Larry was bigger than life. He and I had many things in common. We both loved athletics and running, mathematics and cowboys—gun-slinging, fist-clenching, bar-clearing cowboys. I often envisioned the three of us like the brothers in *Legends of the Fall*, *The Sons of Katie Elder*, or *Tombstone*. I really miss him.

My point is that when I think about Larry, I realize how deeply connected, deeply influenced and deeply committed I am to my family roots in Nebraska, even though I haven't lived there for over thirty years. It's probably the same for many of you with your roots. There is a sense of tradition, loyalty and pride that binds brothers and sisters together even after they are gone. A shared history and a common story shape the family ethos. It's hard to break out of the family influences and become independent, because we are blind to the family ethos. Outsiders have a hard time breaking in, and woe to the one who would tamper with the story. Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday will hunt you down. As you might have guessed, my heroes have always been cowboys.

As a family, the Jews had a history and a story that shaped their ethos. Their story revolved around being God's people, and their history was rooted in Abraham. This was their heritage and their identity. Like most families, they had intense pride and acute blindness. When Jesus tried to redefine their story, he was greeted with disbelief, anger, hatred, and eventually murder.

In chapter 8 of John's gospel, the tension between Jesus and the Jews escalates. We begin with his words in verse 37 as he continues the dialogue with his adversaries.

"I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father." They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this

Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father."
(John 8:37-41a NASB)

Earlier, Jesus suggested to a group of Jews who reportedly believed in him that they were slaves. This statement was met with disbelief: "We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free?'" (8:33). The Jews viewed themselves as sons of Abraham. They had always been free to maintain their identity and worship Yahweh, even though they had been dominated by foreign powers. But Jesus retorted that they were slaves of sin; only the Son could give them true freedom. If they didn't believe in the Son, then they would die in their sin.

Now, since the Jews brought up Abraham and family and fatherhood, Jesus takes the opportunity to explain to them that even though they were descended from Abraham physically, their actions were not Abrahamic in nature. They were not responding to him like their father did. Notice the repeated words, "Abraham" and "father," and the prominence of "word," "truth," and "hearing."

Jesus came from the Father and he spoke the truth, i.e., the words he heard from his Father. The Jews failed to hear because his word had no place in them. They did not receive it so they were unable to understand. In reality, they were seeking to kill Jesus. In this encounter, Jesus is not being meek and mild. He is forcing the action.

God made a covenant with Abraham. He blessed him and promised that he would be a blessing. He changed Abraham's name and told him he would be the father of a multitude of nations. That is what the name Abraham means, "father of multitudes." When the Lord appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18 in the guise of three strangers, Abraham received them. He killed a choice calf and prepared a meal for them. If Abraham was their father, the Jews would be receiving Jesus in the way Abraham received the Lord. Abraham did not try to kill God's spokesman.

In Genesis 26, God spoke to Isaac about his relationship with Abraham:

"I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws." (Gen 26:3b-5)

Abraham was not perfect, but he responded to God by faith. If Abraham was truly the father of the Jews, then they would be hearing Jesus in the way that Abraham heard the promises of

God. But they would not listen to Jesus. Therefore, Jesus suggests that despite their claim they must be children of another father.

They said to Him, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word.” (8:41b-43)

Hearing Jesus suggest that they have a different father than Abraham, the Jews grow indignant. They were not born of immorality or fornication – a sly reference to Jesus’ paternity. It was common knowledge that there was something strange about the conception and birth of Jesus. Even though John does not include a birth narrative in his gospel, like Matthew and Luke, he alludes to the fact that Jesus’ opponents used this as a sneer against him.

The Jews claim they are not illegitimate; they are the true children of God. If Jesus will not concede Abraham as a father, then he cannot deny them God as a father. This too was part of their history. Listen to what God told Moses in Exodus 4:

“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.”’” (Exod 4:22)

Jeremiah reinforces this father/son relationship:

**“With weeping they will come,
And by supplication I will lead them;
I will make them walk by streams of waters,
On a straight path in which they will not stumble;
For I am a father to Israel,
And Ephraim is My firstborn.” (Jer 31:9)**

To this, Jesus says that he came from the Father and was sent by the Father. If indeed God was the father of the Jews, then they would love him and be able to hear his word, i.e., they would believe and act on it. But because they were so locked in slavery to sin and religious security, it is impossible for them to hear. They must have a different father.

Jesus goes on to reveal the identity of their father.

“You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.” (8:44-47)

The Jews were imitating their father, the devil, a murderer and a liar, says Jesus. The devil’s goal is murder; his method is lying. There is no truth in him. He abandoned truth and speaks only from himself, for his own glory. The lie he told in the garden deceived Eve, silenced Adam, and brought death to the whole human race. And he continues to attack humanity through deceptive and death-producing lies. Some Jews said they believed, but they were lying like their father.

Jesus’ question, “Which one of you convicts Me of sin?” evokes no response. They think he is guilty but they cannot prove it.

Jesus asks them why they don’t believe. Again they have no response. So he tells them the answer: They don’t believe because they do not belong to God. God is not their father. Jesus speaks the truth, but the Jews can’t hear the words of God because their inherited family dynamic is based on lying. Only the one who belongs to God, who is truly a part of God’s family, hears what God says.

Every one of us bears a resemblance to the family into which we were born – things like physical features, traits, mannerisms, conduct and speech. Jesus is saying that we also bear a resemblance spiritually to our family and derive our nature from our father. We may say that God or Abraham is our father, but we might be blind. Sonship is attested by likeness and conduct.

As a Jew, Jesus is part of the Jewish family. But spiritually he belongs to a different family than the Jews to whom he was speaking. Jesus does what his Father does and therefore he is a true son. The Jews do what their father the devil does. They think they measure up morally and ethically as Abraham’s sons, but by seeking to kill Jesus, the children of the devil reveal their allegiance. They are in darkness and they are blind. They cannot hear God.

We can have the same problem as the Jews. We can become blind to how we are living in our spiritual community and functioning in the family ethos. We can become deaf to the word which God has for us. We can become hardened to the point of not hearing or receiving Jesus. The Jesus of John 8 administers electric shock treatment to our religious pride and privilege when he asks, “Who’s your daddy?” It’s not what we say that counts, but whether we are hearing, receiving, believing and loving. The things that characterize our life tell us whether our Father is God or Satan.

I am not talking about perfection but about hearing and responding. Last week, a man approached me after one of the services. I met him years ago when he graduated from college, but I hadn’t seen him for a long time. He confessed to being a slave of sin. He said that he had wandered away from the Lord over the past two years and asked me to pray for him. The fact that this man could hear the word meant that God was his Father. Jesus would have been thrilled if the Jews had responded in the same way.

The Jews answered and said to Him, “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. But I do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death.” (8:48-51)

Their theological argument having failed, the Jews turn to personal abuse. They accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan and having a demon. The charge of being a Samaritan is found only here in John’s gospel. Why a “Samaritan?” Maybe they thought the paternity issue meant that Jesus was siding with the despised Samaritans. The charge of being demon-possessed is found in all four gospels, but we don’t know how it is linked to being a Samaritan. Perhaps the thought of a Jew charging another Jew with questionable paternity was so despicable that only demon-possession could explain it.

Jesus does not respond to his accusers in kind, lashing out in anger. He simply denies that he is demon-possessed, saying that he honors the Father in all that he says and does. The Jews dishonor Jesus and therefore dishonor the Father. Jesus can honor the Father because he does not seek his own glory. Unlike mankind, Jesus pursues only the glory that comes from the Father. People who seek their own glory can make an error in judgment and miss out on a gold medal.

God's approval is everything, because he is the one who seeks and judges. The idea that God is a judge triggers a return to the idea of remaining and keeping his word. Perseverance is the true mark of discipleship. The true disciple abides in and keeps God's word. The result is that this one will not see death forever. What an amazing promise: at the point of death, we simply continue to live in a different kingdom. We never taste death. Equally amazing is that even in the midst of a heated argument with those who want to kill him, Jesus offers salvation.

The Jews said to Him, "Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets also; and You say, 'If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.' Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out to be?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'He is our God'; and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word." (8:52-55)

The Jews think Jesus is talking about physical death. Abraham heard and obeyed the word and died. The prophets heard and obeyed and died. If Jesus is making a claim that his word is superior to what Abraham and the prophets heard and spoke and kept, then it must mean that he has a demon.

The Jews question Jesus' identity in an ironic way, asking if he is greater than their father Abraham. The question anticipates a negative answer. But in truth, Jesus is greater than Abraham, just as he is greater than Moses.

Then they ask Jesus who he thinks he is. He replies that he does not make himself to be anything. He is submissive and obedient to the Father. Again he refutes any suggestion that he is seeking his own glory. Any self-glory apart from the glory of God means nothing. Jesus knows that the Father will glorify him. The Jews call God their God, but they have no knowledge of him or of his commitment to glorify his Son. Jesus has known God, but the Jews who say they know him do not know him. For Jesus, knowledge of God and obedience, keeping his word, are inseparable. Hosea confirms this thought: "For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6).

Jesus continues:

"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple. (8:56-59)

Abraham looked forward to Jesus' day and saw it and rejoiced. The Jews use their descent from Abraham as the ground for rejecting that which Abraham longed for and saw by faith from afar. He looked forward; they looked back. Jesus fulfills Abraham's hopes and joys. This is how people came to faith in the Old Testament – by looking forward to God's salvation. And this is how people come to faith in the New Testament, looking at the same promise fulfilled on the cross.

The Jews respond with a crass comment, suggesting it was ridiculous for Jesus to claim to be a contemporary of Abraham. But Jesus tells them, "before Abraham was born, I am." If he had wanted to merely claim that he existed before Abraham, he could have said, "Before Abraham was, I was." But instead he uses the words "*ego eimi*," the same phrase he used in verses 24 and 28, the name which God gives to himself in Exodus and Isaiah (Exod 3:14; Isa 41:4; 43:10; 48:12)

Reynolds Price, the novelist, calls this "the towering crest of Jesus' claim for himself."¹ There is no doubt about what Jesus meant. He was claiming deity. "He was saying, 'I am God himself, here and now: I have always been, will always be.'"² Frederick Beuchner writes,

Perhaps that just as his death was not the end of him, so his birth was not the beginning of him. Before Abraham was – before any king rose up in Israel or any prophet to bedevil him, before any patriarch or priest, Temple or Torah – something of Jesus existed no less truly for having no name yet or face, something holy and hidden... There neither has been nor ever will be a real time without him. If he is the Savior of the world as his followers believe, there never has been nor ever will be a world without salvation.³

The response of the Jews in picking up stones to stone Jesus indicates that this is what they understood. Stoning was the prescribed punishment for blasphemy, but it was to be carried out following a calm judicial decision, not the fruit of mob violence. Jesus escapes as he did at other times (7:30, 44; 8:20.) The text says he went out from the temple. This is perhaps an indication that the shekinah glory, the Word that dwelt among us, had left the temple once and for all. Augustine wrote: "As man [Jesus] flees from the stones, but woe to those from whose heart of stone God flees."⁴

In verse 30, Jesus speaks to the Jews who reportedly believed in him. They turn out to be slaves of sin (8:34), indifferent to Jesus' word (8:37), children of the devil (8:44), liars (8:55), and guilty of mob tactics, including attempted murder of the one in whom they had professed belief (8:59). They claim that their identity is based on being the seed of Abraham, but Jesus tells them that this is not what God is after. As Paul wrote, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter" (Rom 2:28-29).

Jeremiah has a warning to those who pretend to be something they are not: "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircum-

cised...for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart” (Jer 9:25-26b).

Again, we must let Jesus speak to us. Faith is not inherited. It is not passed down automatically from one generation to the next. Growing up in a Christian home might be beneficial, but it does not grant us a relationship with God. Going to church is a good thing, but it does not guarantee a relationship with God. Understanding theology can be very helpful, but it does not mean that we know God. A relationship with God is not defined by a church affiliation or by a doctrinal statement. A relationship with God is just that – a relationship. It is a personal, family relationship, one that is real, honest, truthful, living and healthy. We come to know God like Jesus knows him. We do not get this kind of relationship through family trees, pedigree or our ecclesiastical environment. We get it through hearing in quiet and solitude the voice of God to the point where we abide and remain in what we hear. The result of this relationship is that it changes us and we begin to bear the image of the Father.

It is very helpful to look at the images and metaphors of John 8. This scenic view gives us a crystal-clear picture of the spiritual landscape. We are able to see with extreme clarity the characteristics that distinguish the two kingdoms that collide in John 8:

| Kingdom above | World below |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Light | Darkness |
| Righteousness | Sin |
| Freedom | Slavery |
| Life | Death |
| No Condemnation | Condemnation |
| Truth | Lies and hatred |
| God as father | Satan as father |

We have been called out of darkness, slavery and death to live in light, freedom and life. We have been rescued from a world of lies to a life of hearing truth. We have been kidnapped from an abusive family, with Satan as a father, into the joy, peace and love of the family of God.

When we are born anew, born from above by believing that Jesus is “I am” and that he died on the cross for our sin, we become God’s children. We also become Abraham’s children. This is what Paul says in the book of Galatians: “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:26, 29).

We are adopted into a spiritual family with deep roots. Our history becomes the history of God’s people. And now as his sons and daughters we begin to reflect the image of God for which we were created. We do this because in Christ that is who we are becoming. We are family, and children resemble their parents. This is why Paul can say in Ephesians: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Eph 5:1-2).

Granted, this is a lengthy process. But the real enemies of this process are religious pride and security in external things, thinking that we know God without truly having a relationship with him. We don’t get there through self-effort. The way we grow into our family likeness is seeing ourselves for who we truly are – sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. The more we look at the face of Jesus, the more we become like him. The more we envision ourselves as being God’s son or daughter, the more we will act as such. We imitate God. We begin acting like our Father and eventually we become like him. This is not hypocritical, trying to be something we are not. The hypocrisy is not living in the fullness of our relationship with God. When we claim and live out our divine sonship, our life will be characterized by truth and grace, and we too will offer the same kind of compassion and forgiveness that Jesus showed to the woman caught in adultery.

In 1897, Max Beerbohm wrote a short story entitled *The Happy Hypocrite*. The main character was a wicked man with a wicked face. He fell in love with a saintly girl and wore the mask of a saint to woo and win her. “Years later, when a castoff girlfriend discovered the ruse, she challenged him to take off the mask in front of his beloved and show his face for the sorry thing it was. He did what he was told, only to discover that underneath the saint’s mask, his face had become the face of a saint.”⁵

In our case, we take off the mask of sin, or religious performance, or guilt, or self-hatred, and when we do so it will reveal the face of a saint. That is who we are. We don’t try hard to become sons and daughters; we are sons and daughters. The more we begin acting as such, doing what a child of God would do, the more our face will be transformed into his likeness, and the family resemblance will be unmistakable.

1. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 90.

2. Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 90.

3. Frederick Beuchner, *Listening to Your Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 249-250.

4. Frederick Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1973), 63.

5. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 358.