

John 8:46–59  
Judica (Lent V)  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
March 26, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

In our Gospel Lesson this morning, we find ourselves in the middle of an argument between Jesus and the Jews. Jesus had been at the Temple for the Feast of Booths, the Jewish harvest festival. At first He wasn't going to go. It was simply too dangerous and His time to be handed over had not yet come (7:8). But then Jesus did go to the Feast and began teaching publically in the Temple (7:14). The people were divided over Jesus. Some wanted Him arrested, but, again, His hour had not yet come (7:44). The controversy escalated when Jesus claimed that though the Jews may very well have been descended from Abraham according to the flesh, spiritually they were of their father, the Devil. Like father like son, the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because their father, the Devil, was a murderer from the beginning and the father of lies. But Jesus reveals to us the true Father, God the Father, and the life that comes in His Word, a life of joy that death cannot end.

The Jews claimed they were Abraham's children. But Jesus says: "You are of your father the devil." That's why the Jews don't believe and can't understand what Jesus is saying here. As Jesus says: "Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." There are only ever two possibilities. Either God is our Father, or the devil is. There's no neutrality, no middle ground to focus on something else or to make a decision. Before Baptism, all are born in sin and are of the devil, subjects in his kingdom of darkness. And "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"

(John 3:5). A person remains in the devil's Kingdom until he is born into God's kingdom by water and the Holy Spirit, that is, until he believes and is baptized. In Baptism, God the Father has "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13–14). In Baptism, we go from being "of the devil" to being "of God."

The Apostle John's first epistle makes clear the distinction between those of God and those of the devil, and that when we enter God's Kingdom in Baptism, we also gain an understanding of God's Word. First John 5[19–20] says: "We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life." In Baptism, we are joined to Christ and so we are joined to God the Father, becoming His children. We come to know God as His children, and with that new understanding of the true God comes eternal life. Whoever is of God hears the words of God. Yet so many have ears but do not hear. They do not hear or understand the Gospel message because they are not of God. That's the way it was 2,000 years ago and that's still the way it is today. It's a controversial message, but a true one. A person is either of God or of the devil.

Jesus continues His string of controversial statements in this discussion with the Jews by saying: "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." Those words "truly, truly" or "amen, amen" in John's Gospel are a double exclamation mark!! When Jesus says "truly, truly," He's really trying to get our attention and highlight the importance of what's coming. "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." Experience seems to contradict this statement on a regular basis. We encounter death all the time,

whether daily in the news, or among old friends and acquaintances, or even the death of a loved one which we will carry around with us until the day we die. Everyday, death hangs over us like a dark cloud. The sun will peak through, sometimes more, sometimes less, but even if someone actively seeks to avoid it, the remembrance of our mortality and that of others is always in the background.

So what does Jesus mean with: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death”? When Jesus comes to the grave of Lazarus in John chapter 11[:23–26], He says to Martha: “Your brother will rise again.” Martha says: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the Last Day.” Jesus responds: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Eternal life doesn’t wait until the Resurrection of the dead on the Last Day; eternal life begins already now for those who are in Christ Jesus. Death will still come, unless the Lord returns first, but death for a Christian means being with Jesus in Paradise and resting at Abraham’s side (Luke 16:22).

In Baptism, the Christian has already died: “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death.” And in Baptism, the Christian already lives, walking in newness of life in the resurrection of Jesus. For the Christian, eternal life begins now because eternal life is to know the only true God and to know Jesus Christ, who was sent by God (John 17:3). To know God—and to be known by God—begins now and lasts forever. That’s why Jesus can say that the one who keeps His Word will never see death. For the Christian, death becomes but a peaceful rest. That’s not to say we aren’t scared of death in some sense, or that we’re not sad when death snatches away those we love. We do mourn, but not as those who have no hope.

Like Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, we weep for our loved ones who have died in Christ, yet we know we will see them again.

The Jews respond: “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” Anyone today could say the same thing. How can Jesus say “if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” when Christians die all the time, just like everybody else? Shouldn’t there be some earthly blessing for those who hold sacred the preaching of God’s Word, and gladly hear and learn it? But just think of Jesus Himself. Jesus knew the Father and kept His word perfectly (v. 55), yet even Jesus saw death and tasted it when He was crucified on Good Friday. Jesus died, but His death was overcome by His resurrection. When we are raised from the dead, never to die again, then life will have swallowed up death in victory. The sting of death is still there, but in light of eternal life we see death from a new perspective. We die with our LORD so that we will also live with Him forever.

Next, Jesus says to the Jews: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” How could Jesus know such a personal detail about the life of Abraham, who lived thousands of years before? The Book of Hebrews says Abraham “died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.” Jesus said to the Jews (and remember the double exclamation points): “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” Here Jesus is referring back to the burning bush, when God spoke to Moses, saying: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6). Jesus uses this turn of phrase elsewhere to prove the resurrection of the dead to the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection. When God says: “I *am* the God of

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” He’s showing that He’s “not God of the dead but of the living.” Those who die in faith live to God. Death is not their end.

The LORD then reveals His name to Moses: “I Am Who I Am.” God said to Moses: “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” God is eternal, the only one who can say at all times: “I am.” Others were, or are, or will be—but God is always: “I Am,” the source of all that exists. This name for God became so sacred for the Jewish people they wouldn’t even dare utter it. But Jesus says: “before Abraham was, I Am.” Jesus is the great “I Am,” the one who was , who is, and who is to come, the eternal source of all things. Here Jesus is stating in no uncertain terms that He is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the LORD of the universe. That’s why the Jews picked up stones to throw at Him. They saw this statement as blasphemy and were ready to kill Jesus for it. But Jesus hid Himself and went out of the Temple. His time to die for the sins of the world and rise again from the dead had not yet come, but soon He would enter Jerusalem again for that very purpose.

Jesus is not dead but alive, and He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. And for you, dear Christians, who keep His Word, that is, who believe in Jesus and trust in His life-giving death and resurrection, you will live even though you die. With Abraham, we rejoice to see Jesus’ day, eagerly waiting until that day when we will finally join him and all the saints in the life of eternal joy that shall have no end. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.