

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

---

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, September 25, 2022**

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Evensong**

4 p.m.

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

*on*

John 8:31-38, 48-59

+

## **The True Freedom**

We meet Jesus in the Gospel of John one extraordinary morning, a morning when he taught in the temple, in a supremely public place, despite the growing hostility against him and a number of threats against his life in Judea. That morning, he began teaching by sitting down in a courtyard that was as far as he could progress as a non-Levite. He was in the Treasury, also known as the Court of Women, for this is also as far as women could go in the Temple, both he and they were not allowed in the Sanctuary Court of the Temple itself. They would have had to crane their necks to see through the Nicanor Gate to the place where only priests could enter, where there would be the altar and the basins that would have prepared the regular sacrifices, and the Temple proper would have been resplendent in the center of that courtyard.

In the outer Treasury courtyard, there were four enormous lampstands with four giant golden oil lamps which provided light for the entire city on holy occasions. And it was in this court where Jesus' parents would have presented him as a babe, and where they would have spoken with Simeon and Anna the prophetess.

It is just before this reading and in the Treasury where Jesus' seating teaching was interrupted, and he presented with a woman caught in adultery. He refused to condemn her to death, in the end, many others joined him in this. He also said not long after that that he was the light of the world, and that those that follow him would not walk in darkness but have the light of life. When confronted, he proclaimed that he does nothing of himself alone, but speaks and acts as his Father had taught him, that in knowing him they know the Father, and that he would always do the things that pleased him.

It is at this point that our reading begins, with his speaking to all of those who were convinced by his dramatic action and bold teaching, his most recent followers. He says to those newly on board that if they continue in his path, that they are indeed his disciples. And about such discipleship, he introduces one of his most memorable sayings, telling them that they will know the truth, and the truth shall make them free.

Now this may be an encouraging saying for us, perhaps. But at the time, Jesus' new followers bristled at the suggestion that they needed freeing, that they needed saving from anything, after all, they were acorns of Abraham's mighty oak, and that they were in no sort of bondage. Although the Holy Land had been occupied by the profane Romans, they were free in Abraham, free, they contended, in that holy legacy.

But Jesus counters, saying that they are *not* shining examples of Abraham's children, that sin claims them, sin has them in bondage. After all (and no one denies this when he says it) many of them were seeking to kill him, he who was telling them the truth. What kind of children of Abraham were they?

And this is where it starts to get heated. And our reading for tonight skips over this, unfortunately. You really must read it all. Chapter 8 of John's Gospel. He says, if God was your father, you wouldn't be trying to kill me. Because of your murderous desires, and he truly says this, your father is the devil, a murderer from the beginning. A father of lies, who knows no truth. And because he is your father, you don't believe the truth I tell you from *my* Father.

Hard words, indeed. I don't know how long he can keep these new potential disciples. Would you persist with one who spoke this way about you?

In their frustration and anger, his new students say, you must be a cursed Samaritan, one who doesn't belong in these courts. Or if you are not a Samaritan, you must be claimed by a devil within, no matter how you present on the outside.

This is certainly an escalation. Jesus had said they are children of the devil. And so they say he has a devil inside him. And then Jesus cries out no! No devil is within me. I am honoring my Father, and you are dishonoring me. He comes *this* close to saying that they are dishonoring God. Heavy words in the Treasury of the Temple!

But then Jesus raises the stakes. Leaving aside who is of the devil and who is of God (they seem to be going in circles), he talks instead about life and death. Jesus says that he doesn't seek his own glory, and he doesn't come to judge, that is for his Father. But, for those who follow his words, well they shall not taste death! There is something of the eternal in his teaching, and a grace that has the power to overwhelm death with its quality.

This is where his interlocutors pounce. Aha! "Not taste death"? Who do you think you are? The prophets died. Abraham died? Do you dare to suggest you are better than them? "Whom makest thou thyself?" Or in other words, who do you think you are? Well, we shall tell you! A devil, indeed!

Jesus continues by essentially saying that children should behave like their father, they don't know their own Father, but he does. Also, he retorts that Abraham, although he lived long ago, knew that Jesus was coming, and he rejoiced because of it.

Early tradition held that Abraham had been made privy to the secrets of the ages to come, especially that of the messiah.

Someone quips that Jesus is no older than fifty, hardly one for the great Abraham to care about. And then Jesus says the statement that brings the crowd over the edge:  
"Before Abraham was, I am"

He proclaims a kind of precedence ahead of Abraham, leaning in to their suspicions, *and* he uses the Name of God revealed to Moses. "I am who I am." As he did at least seven times in his teaching ( I am living water, and I am the light of the world, for examples), he uses this divine name in relation to himself, in the shadow of the Temple, in the very place where Abraham displayed his obedience in the near-sacrifice of his son, and this troubling proclamation provokes the fury of the people, who only recently believed in him. And as if proving the accusations of Jesus earlier in their contentious conversation, they unbind their fiery hearts and take up stones to murder him then and there. And Jesus escapes to minister another day. As John writes, his hour had not come.

These people, so poised, if for a moment, to become Jesus' disciples, were indeed in bondage. For they were also poised to attack, ready to destroy, not able to listen to their own well-meaning Father. If the truth would set them free, they weren't in a place to hear that truth, and acted under the influence of another. This entire chapter is a testament to Jesus seeking to break through, to quell the murderous impulses of his own people,

whether it be towards the woman at the start, or himself at the end. And it is an ominous sign that the light of the world must depart the Temple, a temple that John's readers knew would be destroyed.

If the truth will set us free, as Christ proclaimed that morning, the truth must align with the personality and character of our Father in heaven, one that loves, forgives, and is tectonically patient and merciful with we his children. If we do not act in kind, like father like child, are we really his, are we really free? Even if we think our fight is for the truth, or even for God, if we do not act like God in that fight, are we his children? No, we risk everything that matters in believing the ends justify the means. It is that steadfast holistic following in God's way of love that gets us the freedom for which we were made, it is the way of Christ that will set us free.