

“I Am Who I Am”
from Barbara Brown Taylor’s
The Preaching Life

Read John 8:12-59

1. In par. four, BBT writes,

From our safe distance, it is easy to simplify any story with Pharisees in it by making them the bad guys, but they are just doing their job. They are the defenders of the faith; they are the religious authorities in charge of keeping holy things holy, and they do not like Jesus’ type...

This sort of rehabilitation of the Pharisees became popular in the late 20th century with the work of E. P. Sanders and others. In this movement the Pharisees are recognized as a middle-class religious movement which pursued righteousness by “putting a fence around the law” so that if a pious Jew followed these traditions of the elders he or she wouldn’t be in danger of breaking the law itself.

In doing so, they created a system of behavior which often was out of the reach of those of lesser means than they. The emphasis on observance rather than the spirit of the law is roundly condemned in the gospel accounts, which depict them as a brood of vipers or, as Jesus says in this same passage, sons of the Devil. In short, despite the smattering of good Pharisees¹, they are definitely the ones wearing the black hats.

Why does Taylor want to paint the Pharisees so differently from the way John does in this very passage? What rhetorical purpose does this serve?

2. Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God; divine and yet human. This takes thirteen words in English to express yet, as Taylor points out, Jesus doesn’t give the Pharisees’ a direct answer.
 - a. Based solely on the passage and what you recall from the rest of the gospel accounts, why do you think he didn’t answer? (I.e., if the Zealots would have crowned him king, what would the Pharisees have done? Cf. esp. 8:58-59.)
 - b. Why does Taylor think he doesn’t answer?
3. In this sermon Taylor again describes her college encounter with the door-to-door evangelists.
 - a. How does her attitude towards God and Jesus differ from theirs? What does she think of them and their approach?
 - b. After her encounter with them she has an odd experience—an experience of the Spirit?—which she has trouble defining. As she puts it, “I may have been fooling around, but Jesus was not. My heart may not have been in it, but Jesus’ was.” We are used to conversion—and she’s not sure this was it. We are used to baptism as a public vow to follow Jesus—also, not quite right. And we read in Acts of being “filled with the Spirit,” an empowering for ministry quite separate from the indwelling of baptism.²

What category do you have for an experience of God which involves neither *new* belief in him nor even an earnest seeking of him, but which Jesus and the Spirit seem to recognize and respond to?

¹ E.g. the Christian Pharisees in Acts 15:1-5; those who warned Jesus of Herod’s assassination attempt in Lk 13:31; and the Pharisees of the Sanhedrin who didn’t accuse Paul in Acts 23:6-9.

² E.g., the disciples are filled with the Spirit at Pentecost (2:4) and Peter is later filled with the Spirit when speaking to the Sanhedrin.

- c. Why does she tell us this account? What does her experience have to do with the Pharisees' encounter with Jesus? What, in particular, does her anecdote say about what the Pharisees were doing *wrong*?
4. Rather than make declarative statements about his identity Jesus preferred to describe himself—as in the Johannine “I am” statements which BBT lists: “I am the bread, the shepherd, the vine, the light; I am the way the truth, the life.” Indeed, the strongest statements Jesus made of his divinity come of the form of his actions and authority—e.g., he *forgives sins*, something on the Father can do.

There may have been various reasons for this approach during his earthly ministry, such as fear that his ministry would be redirected by the well-meaning but misguided or concern that he would be killed by the religious authorities too soon, and his ministry cut short.

After his resurrection, though, the early church felt no need of such careful approaches, and the epistles are full of clear and powerful language about Jesus.

At the heart of this sermon is Taylor's concept that Jesus, like God, defies definition:

If we cannot say who he is in twenty-five words or less, it is because he is our window on the undefinable, unfathomable I AM, and we cannot sum him up any easier than we can sum up the one who sent him.

- a. How do this passage and Taylor's anecdote show that Jesus is better *experienced* than described?
- b. What experiences define Jesus for you? (Or: if you had to tell someone about Jesus using stories rather than declarative statements, what would you say?)
- c. Answer (b) with reference to the Father, and the Spirit.



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