

“Following Jesus Unsuccessfully”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 7:1-13

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After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him. But when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

Therefore Jesus told them, "My time is not yet here; for you any time will do. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that its works are evil. You go to the festival. I am not going up to this festival, because my time has not yet fully come." After he had said this, he stayed in Galilee.

However, after his brothers had left for the festival, he went also, not publicly, but in secret. Now at the festival the Jewish leaders were watching for Jesus and asking, "Where is he?"

Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, "He is a good man."

Others replied, "No, he deceives the people." But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the leaders.

John 7.1-13. New International Version

I've been slowly and intermittently meandering us through the Gospel of John. We put a bookmark in last March! Now we turn the page to chapter 7, right after it all fell apart.

Jesus had been doing very well. Important people were coming to see him. He was changing lives. Crowds were following. With wondrous power, he was healing sick folks and feeding hungry folks. He walked on water.

But he blew it. Went too far. Said things they would not hear. Made claims they could not accept. From thousands, his fan club was stripped down to a handful or two. And powerful people were out to get him.

So he went home, up to Galilee, to his family, his brothers.

But they do not want him to stay. They want him to succeed. But nothing happens in Nazareth. The local paper just shut down. The internet is still dial-up.

"Yes," you can hear them advising him, *"you messed up. That stuff you said about being*

the bread of life, and people needing to eat your flesh and drink your blood to have God's life . . . that was poor messaging. But don't give up! Here's what you do. Blame your teleprompter. Fire a disciple or two. Get back down to Judea, to Jerusalem. Get back in front of the crowds, back in the headlines."

"The festival . . . Tabernacles. It's coming up. Huge crowds, from all over. They will be celebrating! God provided for our ancestors in the wilderness. God is providing for us now. God will provide for you, Jesus. That crowd will be in the mood. Primed. Ready. Ready for you, brother!"

But Jesus says no. Does he get how the world works?

II

As Carolyn said before the reading, this is the first of a series of run-ins Jesus has with his opponents. For Jesus to do what he needs to do, and what we need him to do, Jesus must confront.

Jesus is God's light, so he confronts whatever casts shadows. Jesus is God's glory, so he confronts whatever denies God. Jesus is God's joy, so he confronts whatever crushes with sorrow. Jesus is God's blessing, so he confronts whatever curses.

Jesus is the Way of God, so we need him to confront whatever leads us astray from God. Jesus is the Truth of God, so we need him to confront whatever deceives us about God. Jesus is the Life of God, so we need him to confront whatever is killing us.

Jesus gets how the world works. So he confronts it.

Kosmos is the Greek word for "world." It is all of God's creation, the whole universe, down to this tiny planet and these peculiar creatures. The *kosmos*: all made by God, all celebrated by God. *"God so loved the kosmos, that God gave God's only Son, Jesus."*¹

God loves, but the *kosmos* does not love back. We are twisted with deep-set attitudes and practices, addictions and abuses, idolatries and deceptions. They seize us, infect us, and turn us from God.²

The *kosmos* came into being through the Light who is God, yet the *kosmos* will not recognize the Light, will not welcome the Light. Not because of ignorance, though fools

¹ My paraphrase of John 3:16.

² N. T. Wright says that "world" means, at one level, "the whole created universe, including all the peoples of the earth. But at another level it means the deep-seated attitude that turns away from the loving creator, and tries to organize its life independently of him." John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 95. John 7 is the first time in the Gospel that the world is described as the "anti-divine power." Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 470.

abound. Because we refuse to recognize the Light who has come among us, refuse to welcome the Light who created us.

God's beloved *kosmos* opposes God. This is Jesus' diagnosis. He refuses to play the game of saying "these things are all good, and these things are all bad." Or, "these people are all good, and these are all bad." We do that all the time. Jesus knows it is mixed up. The *kosmos* created, loved, and being redeemed by God, is also antagonistic toward God, infected with evil.

Jesus will not cover his eyes to that evil. What is wrong is really wrong. Often nasty. Terribly harmful. Sometimes demonic. We'd much rather not see that, especially in ourselves. We love our comfortable fictions.

Jesus gets how the world works. So he confronts it. We need him to. But will we love him for it? "*The world hates me,*" Jesus said, "*because I speak the truth about it, that its ways are evil.*"

It's sobering that his first confrontation is with his own brothers.

III

Jesus confronts their sense of time.

He told them he would not go to the festival. But then he did. Strange. Did he lie? Change his mind?³

Or, was he waiting for something?

For them, for us, anytime is the same as any other. But Jesus seems to be waiting.

Tom Wright offers that,

*Like a skilled sailor watching for the moment when the tide begins to turn, then waiting for the moment when it will be full enough to set sail, he has a plan in mind which will gradually come to light.*⁴

Jesus has great patience. Jesus' timing is different from ours.⁵ He waits, attentive to the signs God his Father gives. He does not rush.

When we follow Jesus, we learn to wait with him. We learn his timing.

³ Bruner helpfully reviews different ways people have attempted to make sense of Jesus' decisionmaking. See pp. 470f.

⁴ Wright, 94.

⁵ John 2:3-10, 4:47-53, 11:3-15.

IV

Notice how he finally goes to the festival. Secretly, not openly. He is the talk of the town. People are very curious, for and against him. He is trending!

But he sneaks in, avoiding the attention. Jesus does not chase the crowds. Of course, he loves every person, and wants to bring everyone into the Life he is. But publicity, winning the vote, packing the pews is not what he's about.

Jesus brothers were on his side. But they did not believe. They did not believe his way.

Following Jesus, being his disciple, is not joining his fan club. Discipleship is trusting him, and his way, because he is our master.

Saint Augustine said something, a long time ago, that grabbed me this week. As I give it to you, understand that he is using used "country" as a metaphor, a way of speaking of the life God is leading us to. Here's what he wrote:

*"Our country is a lofty one but the way to it is low. . . .
Whoever rejects the way, why does he seek the country?"⁶*

I think of us together, Jesus' people. How can we be a community living the life of Jesus, unless we follow the way of Jesus?

I wrestle with this . . . I'd love to see our congregation grow. I'd love our name to grow. That's not bad. With more, we can do more. It could mean that God is opening more people to God's presence in their lives, and gathering them into community with his Son Jesus.

But I need to look deep into my soul. What power my need has, my worldly need, to see myself, and to be seen by others, as successful? Those measures of success the world has, are they faithful to Jesus? If I reject the way he does things, am I really following him? (And, it's not just this guy at the front who needs to ask these questions.)

We can want so much about Jesus. But if we do not want his way — his way of doing things, what he values, his measure of success — do we really want him?

The country is great, and the way is low.

The Way is Jesus, and he goes to a cross. How unsuccessful! May we faithfully follow Jesus the Way, so unsuccessfully. Amen.

⁶ Quoted in Bruner, 470.