

*I am greater than Martin Luther. I am bigger than the apostles. I am more important than all the prophets and patriarchs combined. Now, how do you feel about that? I'm guessing you're like, Whoa, who does this guy think he is!*

Well, now you know how the Jews feel in the Gospel text this morning. I mean, here's Jesus making some pretty big claims about Himself. He doesn't deny that He is greater than Abraham. In fact, maybe you remember a few other times when Jesus mentions just how great He is. First, maybe you remember Jesus saying, "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here" (Matthew 12:6). Or maybe when Jesus says, "I tell you something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41). Or how about when He says, "I tell you something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42). So, throughout the Bible, Jesus says He's greater than Abraham, Jonah, Solomon, even the temple put together. Definitely some pretty big claims!

But to the naked eye, it was difficult for those Jews to see. You know what those Jews saw when they looked at Jesus? A man . . . seemingly just a man. It's like when you were looking at me as I made such claims about myself. Here I am, just a man—that's all. So, maybe now it's easy to see why those Jews get so grumpy with Jesus.

After all, for the Jews, Abraham was kind of a big deal. I mean, God called Abraham to be the first of the patriarchs. And God made a huge promise to him. One night, He took Abraham out back to look at the vast night sky. And under that big blanket of stars, He said, "Abraham, I want you to count all those stars—try if you can. I will give you more descendants even than all the stars in space." So, it was from that one man, Abraham that God established for Himself a people. Eventually, they'd even become a great nation, Israel. And so for the Jews in Jesus' day, Abraham was definitely a big deal. Just bringing up Abraham, mentioning him by name, you'd better be saying something nice about him. That's why it gets so touchy when Jesus infers that He, Himself, is a bigger deal than Abraham ever was.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He then goes on to say, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw it and was glad", implying that Jesus has been around for a while. That makes the Jews respond, "You're not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" It's no wonder they think He's looney-tunes, just plain nuts for talking the way He does. There must be something wrong with Him, they say, like He has some kind of demon. It would be like if I stood up here and not only said how great I was, but that I was pretty old too. Like, "Boy, I remember when Luther nailed those 95 theses—you shoulda been there." Or, "I'll never forget the look on the Apostle John's face when he had his revelation." Or how about this—"Let me tell you about the time I wandered with those Israelites through the desert for forty years—that was no picnic." Crazy, right?

But then Jesus really goes and does it—He drops the motherlode and really ruffles their feathers. Now, in the English translation it seems to fall flat, it's easy to miss. It can sound like Jesus is just re-emphasizing how He's older than Abraham, that's He's lived at least for two millennia—"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was," Jesus says, "I AM." But when Jesus says that, He's choosing His words very carefully. You see, when He makes that statement, most scholars agree He's using God's holy, precious, unutterable divine name—YHWH, "I AM"—to refer to Himself. It's the same name God gave to Moses from the burning bush.

And in the Gospel of John, there are a few of these. You're probably familiar with seven of these "I am" statements. In these sayings, there's a predicate that follows, where a noun comes after "I am." Like, 1.) "I am the bread of life." 2.) "I am the light of the world." 3.) "I am the gate." 4.) "I am the good shepherd." 5.) "I am the resurrection and the life." 6.) "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." 7.) "I am the vine."

But, did you know that there are another seven times that Jesus uses "I AM," only in these cases He's deliberately referring to Himself with the divine name of YHWH. And this here is one of those times. These aren't the same as the other "I am" sayings with predicates, but they are called absolute "I AM" sayings. In these cases, the words "I AM" stand by themselves without a predicate. And used this way, there's no denying that Jesus is speaking of Himself as YHWH.

How else do you explain the fact that today right after Jesus calls Himself “I AM,” the Jews immediately want to stone Jesus for blasphemy?

Here’s another example of these absolute “I AM” sayings. In John chapter 18, the Roman soldiers come looking to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane. And when Jesus asks them, “For whom are you looking?” and they then reply, “Jesus of Nazareth,” and Jesus responds, “I AM,” as soon as He says that, the text tells us that they fall to the ground. Jesus’ words, “I AM,” have the same effect as if God Himself had spoken them. If that’s not what happened then how do you explain the fact that they hit the dirt like they were in the presence of Almighty God? So, you see, when Jesus says today, “before Abraham was, I AM,” He’s making quite the statement. He’s saying He’s not just a man, but even God Himself. When the Jews tell Him no-way, Jesus says YHWH.

Now, as insane as it sounds, I can actually stand by my original statements at the beginning of this sermon. In fact, I can join Jesus in saying that I am greater than Jonah or Solomon or even Abraham, and I wouldn’t be lying. And truth be told, you could stand up here and say the same about yourself—because you are. I know it sounds like crazy-talk, and like those Jews you also might want to throw stones at me for saying it because it just sounds so wrong. But it would actually be blasphemy for me to say otherwise.

After all, just take a moment to consider who you actually are. While to others, like when the Jews looked at Jesus, you might appear as nothing more than a man, just a man. Or when you look in the mirror, that might be all you see—a man, just a fallen, fragile, fallible man. But believe me when I say that you’re no mere man, but *much, much* more!

Because residing inside of you is none other than YHWH Himself, filling you with His divine presence—*God* lives in you. And this is indisputable because at Baptism the Holy Spirit has been poured into your heart. Paul says, “your body is [now] a temple of the Holy Spirit within you” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Another reason this is undeniable is because at this altar Christ gives you His true body and blood to eat and to drink. You know the expression, *you are what you eat*—well receiving Christ’s body, you become His Body. You are so great, because Christ who is in you is so great. 2 Peter 1:4 even declares that “you are a partaker of the divine nature.” Big stuff!

Now, I know what you’re thinking—*Sure, this sounds nice and all, Pastor. But shouldn’t we be careful not to think too highly of ourselves? I mean, haven’t you heard the old saying, “pride comes before the fall”?* But if you think this is just some self-esteem boost I’m trying to give you then you’re wrong. This isn’t putting confidence in the flesh, in yourself, taking pride in anything that *you* are. This is putting our confidence solely where it belongs—in Christ—this is Christ-esteem. It is only because of Him that you and I are anything, but because of Him we are everything that we are! He was our substitute on the cross, dying in the place of lowly sinners. He bore the punishment for our sin, paying the price we deserved. And by suffering our death for us, He gives us His place in life.

Everything that kept us from greatness—our fallen-ness, our fallibility, our fragility as mortal men—all that has been nailed to the cross and has died in the flesh of Christ. There is now nothing keeping us down. And when Christ rose again, you and I became new, resurrected people. People of God, and people with God in them. “I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). And, “if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Romans 8:10). And, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: The old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). That’s all from the Bible, folks! We might say no-way, but God says YHWH.

Maybe now you can understand why I say how great I am and how great *you* are, because of the greatness of Christ that now lives in us. In fact, if we were to say we were less than the greatest that would truly be blasphemy. It would be a lie against God’s Word. A rejection of all that Christ has done for us. A denial of who we are as the redeemed. We would be saying that Christ is less than great, because it is actually *He* that makes us so. And anyway what a shame if we ever did.

Just think what a shame it was when the Jews didn’t recognize Jesus for who He truly is, and what a shame when we can’t see ourselves for who we truly are with Christ! Just imagine what we’d be missing out on! What potential would go untapped! I mean, we’ve all heard the stories before—men and women with tremendous potential, but who never reach that potential because they just don’t see it in themselves. Like, the teenager with tremendous athletic talent, but

who's been told enough times that he'll never amount to anything that he starts to believe it. Or the student who's extremely gifted academically, but when faced with challenging courses gives in and takes the easy way out. Or the young lady with such a sweet, kind, and funny personality, but because of her crippling shyness nobody ever gets to see that side of her. These are all sad stories—let's not become one of them. As one poet put it, "Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been'" (John Greenleaf Whittier).

Before we finish today, I want to do a mental exercise. I want you to close your eyes and empty your mind. Now, go ahead and visualize whatever it is that's holding you back right now. What is it that's keeping you from being who Christ has made you to be? Are you looped in a vicious cycle, a bad habit that's hard to break? If so, Christ has freed you and today gives you a fresh start! Right now, He calls you to a better life! Are you stuck in the past, are old regrets getting in the way? If so, then Christ has paid for those, they're dead—gone—no more! In Him, you are cleansed, purified, holy! Are you trapped in self-doubt, sabotaging yourself, convinced you don't deserve better? Well, Christ has made you no less than a child of God, nothing short of a Christian saint, you are a citizen of heaven!

Now, knowing your new identity what could possibly hold you back? I want you to imagine what things look like now that you have the greatness of Christ. How do you see yourself differently? How do you see your life differently? How does this change the way you see others? What impact does this have on your day-to-day? What does this mean for how you think, how you talk, how you act? Now, open your eyes.

When the world tells you no-way, you say . . . YHWH!