

# Still the One

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Sermon for Sunday, June 13, 2010, Luke 7:18-23

Each of the fifty states not only has an official name, but also one or more unofficial names. Some of these monikers are familiar to most of us; others not so much. For instance, if I were to speak of the Sunshine state, the Pelican state, the Badger state, the Beaver state and the Garden state, how many of you would be able to identify them by their official names? Here they are, in order: Florida, Louisiana, Wisconsin, Oregon and New Jersey.

One of the most unusual monikers for a state is that of Missouri, a state with large cities on its eastern and western borders and a vast expanse of much more rural land in between. Missouri, as you may know, is called the “Show Me” state. What you probably don’t know is how the state got that name.

Turns out, no one knows for sure. The official website of the Secretary of State in Missouri admits that there are several stories that circulate, claiming to account for the name. The website shares two. The less flattering one is that when miners from the Missouri lead mines went to Colorado to work, they needed more than verbal instructions. It was said, “He’s from Missouri. You’ll have to show him.”

The more flattering version concerns a congressman from Missouri who went to Washington and wasn’t impressed with all the posturing and fancy talk. During his time in Washington, he took a side trip to Philadelphia. In a speech there, he declared, “I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me.”

Whatever its origin, the phrase “the Show Me State” has come to suggest that Missourians are skeptical and maybe just a wee bit stubborn. They aren’t going to take anyone’s word for anything. They want proof. They want to see for themselves.

Sometimes in the church, you hear skepticism spoken of as if it were a bad thing. But in the gospels, Jesus seems to have a genuine respect for those who don’t leap to conclusions, those who ask questions, and those who need evidence. In John’s gospel, he responds to inquirers with the invitation, “Come and see.” And here in Luke’s gospel, we see him doing something similar.

John the Baptist has had a popular and successful ministry as a prophet and a preacher of repentance. But Jesus has now begun his own successful ministry, and many things are surely being reported about him. Part of John’s message had been that there would be one coming after him who would be so great that John wouldn’t be worthy to untie the coming one’s sandals. Having heard so many things about Jesus, John decided to send some of his disciples to ask Jesus a question. It was a simple and straightforward question. What John wants to know is, “Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

As is so often the case, Jesus chooses not to give a simple answer. Think of all the times he answers questions with a question, or with a parable. In this case, he responds to a simple “yes” or “no” question with a little speech. And, we should take note, he never gets around to saying either yes or no:

“Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and

the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."

Let's face it – it would have been so easy for Jesus to say, "Yes, I am the One," or even "No, I'm not the One." But Jesus doesn't say either. Jesus says report what you have seen and heard. Focus on the evidence, not the advertising, not self-promoting claims or rumors. Stick with what you have observed. Draw your own conclusions.

Jesus practically invites them to be skeptical, or at least to think seriously. He doesn't want people to believe in him just because he gives a good speech, or because he makes claims about himself, or because he makes a bunch of promises. Who Jesus is is revealed by what he does.

In these days of PR and politician's spin, of image consultants and focus groups, of marketing experts and manipulative ads, there is something awfully refreshing about Jesus' approach. There is nothing manipulative about it. It is so straightforward. Observe and draw your own conclusions, Jesus says.

But that is not all Jesus says. Jesus says, "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." It seems like an odd thing to say. Why would anyone take offense at someone who is doing the things that Jesus is doing? Why would anyone be offended by someone who gives the blind their sight, makes the lame to walk, cures the leper, makes the deaf to hear, raises the dead and preaches good news to the poor? What could be offensive about that? Nothing.

So how might Jesus offend anyone? If not by what he does, then by what he doesn't do. Behind this scene is a set of expectations. John the Baptist, like many others in Israel, had been expecting a messiah who would come with a different kind of power, a messiah who would fight for the liberation of God's people from the tyranny of Rome. Many were expecting a messiah who would come and insist that the ritual purity of Israel be restored. Remember, John the Baptist made the effort to separate himself by going into the world and living a simple life. Jesus, on the other hand, fellowshiped with sinners, enjoyed good food and drink, and encouraged women, Samaritans and even Gentiles to be part of his work in the world. Jesus knew some people might be offended because he was not everything they expected a messiah to be. They would be offended because they would be disappointed.

If we think about it, we will realize that Jesus did disappoint a lot of people. The reason, of course, was not that Jesus was less than or other than what Jesus was supposed to be. The reason Jesus disappointed people was because the people expected Jesus to be someone he was never meant to be. Jesus' message to the disciples of John was, essentially, "Don't let your expectations of who or what I am supposed to be get in your way of seeing and understanding who I am."

There is a valuable lesson here, not only for our understanding of Jesus, but also for our relationships with one another. It isn't always a bad thing when we disappoint others. If we never disappoint anyone, it is either because they don't expect much from us, or because we allow their expectations alone to determine who we are and what we do. The latter is a frantic and unfulfilling form of life. It isn't that we should want to disappoint people, just for the fun of it. It is that we need to be willing to disappoint people when it is necessary to fulfill what we believe to be God's will for us.

Good parents disappoint their children. I believe that. Children are great at having unrealistic expectations for their parents. Children also often want their parents to give them more or do more for them than parents should. Parents who never disappoint their children

teach their children to be both dependent and controlling. They suggest to their children that the children deserve to always be the center of attention, and that parents don't deserve to have lives of their own. It is the duty of parents to disappoint their children.

Likewise, it is sometimes the duty of children to disappoint their parents. Parents can have unrealistic expectations of their children, just as children may have unrealistic expectations of their parents. The Bible says, "Train up a child in the way he or she should go." That doesn't mean in the way you as a parent may want them to go, but the way God created them to go. A parent who wants his son to be a football star may be disappointed when the boy chooses to become an actor instead. A parent who dreams of her daughter going off to college may be disappointed when the girl takes up a trade instead. But the children have not done anything wrong, as long as they are trying to follow their best understanding of who God created them to do and to be.

We get over these kinds of disappointments when we learn to set aside our expectations, however deeply held they may have been, and learn to appreciate our loved ones for who they are. And that starts with getting to know them by observing with an open mind what they do and don't do, what their values are, how they live.

That was all Jesus was asking of the people of his time. "Go tell John what you have seen and heard." Base your conclusions on what you observe. And don't let your expectations or your disappointments keep you from seeing what there is to see.

At first, it may seem like Jesus is just dodging the question. But if we look deeper, we see he is answering in a very profound way. We want a simple answer. We don't want to have to do our own thinking. We don't want to have to wrestle with doubts. So Jesus disappoints us. He doesn't give a simple answer. He makes us think. And he requires us to wrestle with our doubts.

But out of that disappointment comes wisdom, as we begin to realize that there is more to faith than simple answers. Out of that disappointment comes confidence, as we realize that faith in Jesus can stand up to scrutiny. Out of that disappointment comes a more sturdy faith, one that has room for doubts.

Amen.