

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 20, 2010
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Kingdomtide)
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Zechariah 12:8-13:1
Psalm 63:1-8
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 9:18-24

Reflecting on our Gospel lesson for this morning, New Testament scholar

Fred Craddock once observed:

*There is enough misery in the world to make the message that a Messiah **will** [one day] come believable. There is [also] enough misery in the world to make the message that a Messiah **has come** unbelievable. Therefore, the first and major task of a Messiah is to get people to quit looking for one.* [Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 126-27]

Based on the conversation here with Jesus and the disciples, it would seem that this major task has been completed. In response to Jesus' question about his identity, Peter says: "You are the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ."

So everything's good, right? The disciples can now go out and say to folks, "you can stop looking for the Messiah to come -- he's here!"

So what Jesus does next just does not compute. At the moment where you'd think that the disciples are ready to fan out and shout from every roof top that the Messiah has arrived, Jesus says, "don't do it."

At this moment where you'd think that the disciples are prepared to rent space on billboards and buy ad spots on radio and TV, Jesus says, "no."

At this moment where you'd think the disciples are ready to launch a whirlwind tour of the surrounding towns and villages, Jesus' strategy is to keep everything on the "down low," to keep it quiet. It is a strategy that one biblical scholar (many years later) aptly named "The Messianic Secret."

The question for Jesus, of course, is: WHY?

Before we answer that, I think that these many years later, we in the church find ourselves in a situation very similar to what the disciples encounter here with respect to *who Jesus really is*. And just as Jesus warned the disciples to be careful about sharing who he was, I believe that the church of today must be very careful about *how* we proclaim Jesus to the world.

To be more specific: There is still so much misery in the world that it can be tempting for the church today to offer to the world a Jesus and Christianity that is a "magic bullet" -- the panacea that makes everything better, removes ambiguity, and brings a quick and positive resolution to all problems.

When I was in high school, there was a wonderful gospel artist named Andre Crouch. He had a band called Andre Crouch and the Disciples. His music was inspiring and uplifting. I had several of his albums, and on one of them was a song entitled, "Jesus is the Answer." Crouch and the band would sing, "Jesus is the answer for the world today, above him there's no other, for Jesus is the way."

That song gave me a lot of strength and inspiration. And I still believe the spirit behind those lyrics is true.

But if we are not careful, the church can end up offering a Jesus to the world who is little more than a guru who can help you in your search for success and self-fulfillment. In our consumer culture, we offer up Christianity as a “product” superior to other religious products on the market, and Jesus as the one who has the formula to make us happy.

Author and pastor Pete Wilson says it this way:

We often treat God like we do a vending machine. When you walk up to a vending machine, you expect to insert the appropriate amount of money, press the correct number or code, and out will pop whatever you are hungry for. The whole process takes about forty-five seconds. We expect the same thing from God. Maybe not consciously. Maybe we'd never say it. But we still assume that if we do all the right things, say all the right things, and have the right attitude, we can simply press a magic spiritual button and get whatever it is we desire in the moment. We're looking for a quick spiritual transaction that doesn't necessarily lead to a deeper level of intimacy, but gives us what we want. And like children, we want it now! [Plan B: *What Do You Do When God Doesn't Show Up Like You Thought He Would?* Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009, p. 84]

Let's return now and attempt to answer the question as to why Jesus tells the disciples to keep his identity a “low key” matter. Jesus gives the reason for his instruction immediately after the instruction.

The reason for his demand for silence is because the disciples don't fully understand yet *how* Jesus will do his work as Messiah, and because of that they are

likely to offer up a Messiah to the world that is quite unlike the Messiah Jesus has come to be!

Jesus has not come to be the disciples' warlord. He has come to be their *suffering* Lord. He has not come to be their spiritual vending machine, to help them to "find themselves." He has come to help them *die* to themselves, to find their true potential by giving their lives away in meaningful relationships with God and others. He has come to invite them to relationship, a relationship that is not merely a *growth process* -- but perhaps more importantly, a *death struggle*.

The way that Jesus will do God's work will not be the heavy-handed way, the way of throwing his weight around and posturing himself as some "new and improved" product in the religious marketplace. Jesus will do God's work not by removing problems from people, but by sharing those problems and giving his life to redeem them.

And because the way Jesus has come to do it is so foreign to these men who follow him, Jesus instructs them to keep quiet, to stay low key, to be careful about how they present Jesus to the world.

Now obviously, the church of today has not been called to be silent when it comes to proclaiming Jesus to the world. Indeed, we believe that Jesus *is* the answer for the world today, or we likely wouldn't be here.

So the church isn't called to silence. But I believe that the church *is* called to prudence and discernment about the *kind* of Messiah we offer to the world. We are called to be wise and careful about *how* we preach Jesus, and about how we represent Christianity in what has become a vast religious marketplace.

It could, I suppose, be tempting for us at Epworth to want to offer to our community a sort of "vending machine" Christianity. To offer Jesus as the path to self-fulfillment instead of the path to self-sacrifice and suffering love.

But the words of Jesus from this text ring in our ears this morning, reminding us of our calling. We are called to change our world not by removing peoples' problems from them or offering magic wands or bullets, but by doing what Jesus did and what the Paraclete does -- by walking with people and sharing their lives in small, tangible ways.

As we come to the table this morning, the bread and wine we share together remind us that we can never hope to find ourselves until we lose ourselves, until we are caught up in the love of the One who gave of himself for us. And the very act of sharing the sacrament together can be a means of helping us on that journey, the journey where each new day shows us that true life comes not by grasping and holding on, but by letting go and giving away.

Surely this is what it means -- in part -- that the Spirit has come to the church in this season of Kingdomtide.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.