Sermon for Sunday September 3, 2023 Dealing with the Hard Thing

One of our parishioners came up to me after the service last week and asked me: "Why does Jesus sternly order the disciples not to tell anyone he is the Messiah?"

It's a great question. We talked about how it might be that he didn't want to get into another argument with the Pharisees, or because he had some other things he had to do before he told the world, or because they just weren't ready to comprehend the whole thing, and we agreed that the last option was the most likely.

And today we are hearing from Jesus exactly how complicated this whole Messiah thing really is.

Imagine it using key phrases from a couple of familiar movies. Peter, the fellow who gave the one-number-one right answer in last week's gospel, is so shocked that he says "Don't say that!" and he sticks his fingers in his ears, goes "leeleeleeleelee…" or maybe he says "surely you can't be serious…"

And Jesus turns and looks him in the eyes and says "Don't call me Shirley."

And then he says "You can't handle the truth."

Exit stage left.

Jesus is defining what a Messiah really is, someone who is willing to go to any lengths to save people who have forgotten who God really is.

Someone who is willing to suffer torture and death.

Someone who will die rather than back down. And he is doing it not just to save others, but to show how each and every one who follows Jesus has to be willing to do that too.

You want to be a follower of Christ? Listen to the hard truth of what that means:

It's not about the money.

It's not about the glory.

It's not about being applauded by the crowds.

It's about caring for your fellow humans enough to do anything to help them.

It's about recognizing that there will be pain and suffering and that people will think you're an idiot or crazy.

It's about knowing that you won't be able to fix it all but you cannot stop trying.

What a pitch, right? Sign me up!

If we think our job as a Christian is to quote Bible verses and hand out a sandwich, we've missed out on this part of the Gospel, the hard part. The definition of Messiah. The carrying of a rough wooden cross that breaks your back and imbeds splinters in your hands. The taking on of the burden of all the hurts of the world, looking at those burdens with no way to excuse them, only to try and change them.

The good news in today's gospel is that there is only one Messiah. I am not the Messiah. You are not the Messiah. Only Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, is the Messiah. The painful news is that even though each of us does not have all the gifts that the Messiah does, we're still expected to do our part.

And the corollary to that is that if we want to change things, to do our part, inevitably we will offend someone.

Jesus certainly knew that well.

His message directly challenged the leadership of Herod and the Chief Priest, the Pharisees, the Scribes. Those people had fallen in love with their power and their privilege, and had insisted on a focus on Torah even though they ignored the very purpose of Torah – for God's people to live together in a wise and caring and healthy way.

We see that sort of problem in today's world, when we see what Vladimir Putin is trying to do in Ukraine. We see that sort of problem in today's world when we see kleptocrats in developing countries padding their own offshore bank accounts while their people are starving. We see that sort of problem in today's world when we see the monkey's knot of problems in our own medical system, where the bonuses to big pharma executives and to insurance executives keep growing as it becomes harder and harder for our people to get the medicines and the care they need. We see it in our own lives when we sit in comfort and try to hoard everything we've got, instead of seeking to have just enough.

And we know that solving the problem of greed and power and consumerism juxtaposed with unequal opportunity for getting "just enough" is a huge one, because it is at the heart of human brokenness.

As Jesus knew. As his disciples knew. Peter was afraid when Jesus named him the leader of the community of Christ-followers after Jesus would die on the cross. Peter was afraid when Jesus reminded the disciples that they wouldn't have Jesus with them much longer. Peter knew that he was unequal to Jesus: how could he possibly do this thing, this unprecedented thing?

And yet he knew he must. Imperfectly, incompletely, one small step at a time, knowing there would be times when he made the wrong decision and sometimes when he made the right decision.

Just like us.

Just like us, wondering what thing we each can do to turn the tide of that brokenness. Praying for guidance even when we are overwhelmed by it. Looking for the smallest gleam of hope and change in the world.

A friend called me up a little while ago. She's pastoring a church I once served, a parish with a small cluster of Sudanese families. She wanted to let me know, because of my love for those families, that one of their cousins who had recently come to the United States had died. She had been a victim of spousal abuse. This was to be a new start for her, her almost-adult children and her preteen son. But the damage to her body and her heart was too much, and she died. And the grief and "what-ifs" were manifold, and deserve their loving attention and pastoral care. But the community of this parish and the area Sudanese community are already starting to figure out how they can support the preteen as well as the almost adult children, how they can provide comfort for the family back in Sudan and Uganda, and how to do the long hard work of grieving across cultural differences.

Will this community get it right all the time? Probably not. Will they feel they've done enough? Probably not.

But sometimes, the only thing to do to address the enormity of the work is to do one thing. Clothes for the family for the memorial service. Meals – don't we always know that food can heal? – delivered. Money to address the cost of the memorial service. Prayers. Always prayers.

When faced with the things that hurt our hearts, we can be overwhelmed. Just as Peter was overwhelmed, and said something that Jesus did not like. But Peter kept going in his own Peter-like way. And so do we, in our own way, in our own world, in our own prayers and actions.

It's a start, and it will lead us to the next step in the work. It may seem not enough, but it is enough. For now.

Amen.