

Sermon for Lent II February 25 2024

Right before today's Gospel reading, Jesus asked the disciples "who do you think I am?" and Peter said "You're the Messiah."

You can imagine this as a category in Jeopardy, and Peter yells, I'll take Theology for four hundred shekels. The statement pops up. "The Messiah" and Peter hits the buzzer and answers in the form of a question, of course. "Who is Jesus?" Four hundred shekels added to his total on the spot!

If all questions and answers were so straightforward, it would make my task as a preacher ever so much easier.

But theology is never straightforward, is it?

And the fact that Peter gets one answer right doesn't mean that he truly understands it. I could answer a category on Jeopardy that's some factoid about physics, but no one would ever call me a physics genius, especially Sister Assumpta, my tenth grade physics teacher, who gave me a mercy grade of B because she liked me when I should have gotten a C.

But back to Peter and today's Gospel. Peter knows that Jesus is the Messiah. That's been established.

But the more important question, the one that Jesus has to address today, is "who – or what – is the Messiah?"

And it's complicated by the fact that time and time again in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has told the disciples and other people who've witnessed him healing or teaching or helping that they shouldn't tell anyone what's happened. He's hiding something, or waiting to share more. And yet he has asked Peter who he is, Peter has responded correctly, and now Jesus is going to tutor them in what awaits him.

He tells them that he isn't going to be a mighty vengeful King, tearing apart the Roman oppressors and vanquishing the venal Jewish leaders. Instead, he tells them that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said this quite openly."

Peter, who is the sort of fellow that is a verbal processor: he doesn't think quietly what this bad news means, he spits it out: "Don't say that! It's frightening, and it isn't what we thought it all meant."

And Jesus, who may have been worried that they would not understand how his role as Messiah would look, now knows that he's got some work to do. And he's more than a little aggravated. So he says something harsh. "Get behind me, Satan! You're thinking about this the wrong way and you're letting your fear get the better of you."

Poor Peter! One day the A student and now the failure!

But Peter's response is the very human response, one of shock and worry about what this will mean for him and the others who follow Jesus. He's worried about losing Jesus, and he's also worried about his own skin. He knows what Herod does to people who threaten his leadership. He knows what the Romans do to troublemakers. And Jesus is saying very clearly that his task as Messiah is to be a troublemaker, to do things that make the power players nervous, to speak truth about relationship to Father God in heaven. And that Jesus is going to die because of this.

And then he says the thing that makes perfectly clear what this means to them: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this

adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

In other words, if you want to follow me, you’ve got to keep the big picture in mind. It’s not about having a cushy safe life here and now. It’s about doing the hard things now so that you will have your reward of eternal life in heaven.

There’s a saying that is often heard among churchy people – we do love our little sayings, don’t we? – that church is not about comforting the afflicted, it’s about afflicting the comfortable. It’s about spurring us to do the hard things in this life, the things that make us uncomfortable, the things that take us out of our zone of safety and our comfortable lives.

The saying is not entirely correct, of course. We are about comforting those who are in need of comfort, whether they are within these walls or outside of them. But the point is that if we only seek comfort for ourselves rather than stretch to offer comfort for those who have little, we’re not really being followers of Jesus.

It’s as simple as this: we’re intended to be uncomfortable in this life and to focus on helping others find their own comfort.

And that’s a hard message. And we’re tempted ourselves to say “don’t ask that of me, Lord. Don’t say that scary thing.”

And yet, when we do try to do that, we are often surprised by how we feel afterwards. I have often been told by folks who did something for others “I think I got more out of it than the person I helped.” We take teens on mission trips so that they can witness the complexity of the world around us and learn that it is good to do something. But you don’t have to go on a mission trip to somewhere far away to do something for someone else.

Several years ago, I served a parish where the teens went on a weeklong mission trip each summer to do some sort of work to help a community

in need. Some years, we went to Appalachia and did repair and rebuilding work on mobile homes up in the hollers, where older people with black lung disease or other chronic illness lived in poverty. The night before we left, we reflected on the experience and what we learned. One girl said “at the beginning of the week, all I could think of was how could Mr. Jack live in that dirty, beat-up place with no room to move around. At the end of the week, he was like my grandpa, with stories about his time in the Army and his work in town after he couldn’t be a miner anymore.” Mr. Jack got new insulation in the walls of the mobile home and new flooring in the kitchen area, and we fixed his door. The young people learned skills that they might not have had before and started to see that just because someone lives in poverty, they are not poor in spirit.

A few years later, we could not travel to Tazewell, or up to Johnstown Pennsylvania to respond to a need after flooding in the community. Instead, we decided to have our mission week at home. We worked with our community food bank and identified neighbors who were clients of the food bank, and who lived in their own homes, but couldn’t maintain them because of limited resources, physical ailments, or age. This was in a middle-class neighborhood. From the outside, you generally couldn’t see the problems these persons were living with. Occasionally, you’d see a broken window, or old paint that needed to be redone, but the homes looked like the other homes we saw.

But in that week, we replaced a kitchen floor that was about to fall through because of water damage to the floor joists. We fixed windows. We cleared out an overgrown garden that was full of poison ivy. We painted the exterior of a house. Kids were using circular saws, chain saws, heavy high ladders, and a thousand other tools. As we reflected afterwards about the “mission in place week,” one boy said “I never realized how many poor people lived right here in our neighborhood. We never would have known. I felt glad that we could fix that floor – it was

so dangerous. I never knew I could make some person so happy. It felt good.”

Going out of their comfort zone transformed those teenagers and the adults who were their companions. They learned more than just how to mud drywall. They learned empathy, compassion and love.

But it’s not just teenagers who need to learn that. And it’s not the problems that require power tools that need addressing.

Sometimes the way to provide comfort is through simple human interaction. Through empathy, compassion and love. By speaking kindly and respectfully to another person. By saying “hey, that’s not kind” when someone cracks a joke intended to make someone else feel small. By saying a prayer for someone you’ve struggled with, even though you don’t much like them. By giving to organizations that help those in need. By making a sandwich and giving it to a hungry person.

It's by listening as well as talking, when someone needs to talk. It’s about a pat on the shoulder or a handshake.

By being as Jesus taught us: loving, willing to go out of our comfort zone to love, to look for ways we can comfort others.

May we consider what we can do to comfort others directly and in all our humanity, without fear. May we follow Jesus. Amen.