

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 9.13.15

Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-9
Mark 8:27-38

Peter's calling Jesus the Messiah isn't merely a compliment. It's a confession of faith. It's a glimpse he has of the truth—which likely suggested to Jesus that Peter was now ready for the full story.

It's a story that not only *includes* crucifixion but is practically all about crucifixion.

Peter then pushing back against the notion that Jesus was trying to teach 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, all of which he said quite openly; Peter pushing back against this isn't merely a show of affection that Peter has for Jesus. It's a demonstration of Peter's persistent failure to understand fully the purpose of Jesus and the nature of God.

Jesus' calling Peter Satan isn't merely an insult. It's an unveiling, a revelation that the "Satan" wasn't just someone who would show up in the desert to tempt Jesus. No, this "Satan," which is to say adversary, would actually be an on-going temptation before Christ not to do what was his to do.

It would take on many forms—this temptation; but the message would be the same. "Be great," says the "Satan." "Be glorious," says this adversary of God to the Christ. Be impressive, dazzling, powerful. Come to this evil world in might, not in vulnerability. Come to these fallen people with coercion and thrall, not with freely offered love. Don't allow yourself to be shamed; fight back! Don't allow yourself to be tortured; fight back! Don't allow yourself to be killed; fight back.

Peter didn't say anything so vociferous, so insistent, as all this. In fact, according to Mark, Peter just "rebuked" Jesus for claiming that he would be crucified. But a similar spirit was there.

But you know, I've said all this before. I've said it many times before. The fact is that Jesus explained that this must happen to him three different times; all three synoptic gospels agree that Jesus said as much three different times, which means that every year we're to consider this teaching thrice.

As it happens, this is the first Sunday of our 15th year together as pastor and congregation. So fourteen years, three times a year: but why not? This teaching that Jesus had for the disciples, this stubborn fact—that Jesus must undergo great suffering and be killed and then on the third day rise again—is the heart of it all.

The irony isn't lost on me. Isaiah speaks of a teacher who sustains with a word. Jesus is easily identified with the teacher who sustains with a word. And today, as we're to wonder at how a word might sustain, I got nothing. Tasked to bring some word to you this morning, I'm coming up empty.

Trust me, I waited for it.

I hope there's meaning in the waiting—and not just for me, for you too.

On the other hand, maybe it's for the good that I've got nearly nothing new to say. After all, Jesus throughout this gospel is remembered to have told people not to tell anyone about him. Mark's gospel is the gospel of the so-called messianic secret. Jesus herein is always remembered to have told the people he healed or cured or made well not to tell anybody what had just happened. Silence, struck dumb, in response to Jesus' presence, Jesus' acting: maybe this is for the good.

We don't know why he wanted to keep himself secret. But we have our guesses: that Jesus didn't want word of him to get out there before it was time, before he was ready, before the earthly work that he'd come to do was finished and it was time for the next phase. (The next phase would, of course, be arrest, trial, sentencing, death.) Really, not much good would be served if Jesus were to die before the world came to know him, to desire him, to hope in him, only then to reject him. All that takes time.

This occasion is no different. Jesus is remembered once again to have “sternly ordered them—[the disciples]—not to tell anyone about him,” even as the narration notes that “Jesus said these things quite openly” to the disciples, at least. They were to be in on the secret. They were in the know. The rest of the world, though...

But it seems people had already heard. After all, what begins this whole exchange is Jesus asking the disciples, as they went to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, “Who do people say that I am?” So, clearly, people had been talking about him and Jesus knew people had been talking about him.

Their answers were close but not exactly right. Jesus was (and is) of a piece with John the Baptizer, and Jesus did (and does) follow in the prophetic tradition of Elijah and the other prophets. But he's also something more, something particular. He was (and is) the Messiah, which is to say the anointed one of God—and *this* is to say that something singular would be required of him, something unique though universal would be pressed upon him and revealed through him.

Kenosis is a theological term that means self-emptying. Paul makes use of this in his letter to the Philippians, or rather makes use of a hymn in this letter, and the hymn makes use of the word and concept, kenosis. “He emptied himself,” goes the hymn, “taking the form of a slave, being born

in human likeness.” Such emptying, Christian tradition would have us know, opens a way into one’s heart for divine will. Self-emptying opens a way for God. Kenosis.

It’s tough to imagine what this looks like played out. It’s tough to come up with examples of this. There are cheap imitations of kenosis. There’s repression. There’s denial. There’s masochism—the finding of pleasure in your own pain. There’s passive aggression.

I seem to remember a scene from Lily Tomlin’s one-woman show, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, a favorite of mine. The character Lyn and her husband Bob are having one of their worst, and what would be their last, fight. They’ve made the tough transition from being young hippies in love to being successful yuppies, he a man who seeks to get in touch with his feminine side and she a second-wave feminist who means to “have it all.” They have twin boys whom they’re raising to be non-violent, so they’ve armed them with Bataka encounter bats, which are therapeutic toys “designed to enable children...to release aggression in a fun and safe way.” Lyn and Bob are now using them on one another. As she “encounters” him, she says, “I’m so sick of your disappointment in me; I’m disappointed too. I see now you’re not so damn Zen, after all; you’re passive-aggressive. Somehow, we both mistook that for spirituality. And your acting like you’ve transcended your ego is the biggest ego trip of all!”

It’s a funny scene, and sad. And it’s a perfect example of what kenosis is not.

What it *is*: I think of the Voting Rights activists who, in 1965, marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge while white men with whips on horseback waited on the other side, deputized and authorized to whip those peacefully marching, to shoot them if need be. I think of those who joined the Dutch resistance during the war, hiding Jews and others whom the Nazis would gather up for extermination—an act that would make each of the resisters candidates for extermination. I think of Malala Yusefzai, the Pakistani girl whom a member of the Taliban shot in the face simply because she was attending school, after which, once recovered, she boarded that same bus to go to school. I think of Ruby Bridges, our America version of Malala, a six-year old on whose shoulders our society laid the burden of desegregating the public schools.

The fact that examples are hard to come by reveals what near impossible thing Christ accomplished—accomplished perhaps in heaven, changing something of the nature and relationship between God and the world; and accomplished definitely in history, demonstrating self-emptying that people might practice it so flickers of salvation will interrupt banal injustice and offer a foretaste of God’s kingdom that is coming. The fact that examples of kenosis seem only to arise once in a great while, like tiny islands amidst the violent tides of history, rather than to show up in the

comfortable commonplace of the everyday, strikes me as evidence of what miraculous thing Christ managed to do and what he revealed and enabled us to do when history demands—that God’s kingdom might indeed be coming, coming at least in part because of what acts of kenosis we might manage.

All that comes from the cross. But there’s something else here. Something is going on the readings for today about speaking, hearing, and keeping secrets. I can’t make much sense of it, I only notice it. It’s a slub thread woven into all the texts but not contributing to much of a pattern as far as I can tell.

In the prophetic text, the one speaking, whom we call the Suffering Servant, recognizes he’s been given the tongue of a teacher, one who can sustain the weary with a word.

In the epistle, which we didn’t hear—a passage from the earnest and helpful letter of James, full of well-meaning advice and good common sense—our writer warns of the dangers of speaking. “The tongue is the smallest member,” the writer claims, “yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.” It is a “world of iniquity; ... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”

And the two wisdom texts, though not directly addressing what words can do, certainly lend themselves to our considering what we say, when we say it, and why. What do our words serve? What do we intend when we speak, and what do we affect? When are our words blessed with wisdom and creative power, and when are they sloppy, self-serving, destructive? What’s makes the difference, and how do we know? Most of all, in what way is the gospel serviced by spreading word, and in what way is it hampered or put at risk?

Last week we hear a story of a woman who’d heard of Jesus, an encounter that was followed by a man who left his own encounter with Jesus and spread the word of him. Hearing, speaking, keeping silent.

Good questions, I think. I just don’t have any answers.

Once, on Facebook, I wrote that the older I get the more I’ve learned to hold my tongue. I can always go back to some situation and say what I didn’t earlier, but I can’t go back to having said something and unsay it. An old friend of mine, a firebrand, a sort of demagogue, wrote as a comment, “Boy, you’ve changed.” I don’t think she was happy with the change. It made me wonder, am I?

That’s it.

You know, I'd love to be the sort of teacher and preacher who can always manage to sustain the weary with a word. But sometimes I'm one of the weary ones. I trust, though, that there is meaning in the waiting.

Thanks be to God.
