

Sunday, September 3, 2023
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17, Year A)

Matthew 16.21-28

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/6944285078936587>

(Sermon begins at about 22:25)

“Communication”

Communication is a wonderful thing. Providing us with the ability to convey and exchange information about virtually anything. From the observable to the imagined, as well as our own personal perceptions, thoughts, and feelings which are otherwise unobservable to others. But, as I'm sure we have all observed and experienced firsthand, communication, while valuable—even indispensable—can and often is messy and confusing. Sometimes to the point of detracting from or even preventing the meaningful conveyance of information. As we know, communication is so much more than the actual words used. The speaker or writer has their own personal assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives that inform their choice of words. Those words are then received by someone else, who has their own assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives about whatever is being conveyed. If consistent or similar to those of the speaker or writer, then effective communication occurs. But if there are differences in the underlying assumptions, or beliefs, watch out. There is the potential for miscommunication. For misunderstanding. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we are not on the same page as those we are seeking to communicate with. Sometimes, we aren't even in the same book.

Just consider our media—broadcast, as well as social. As we see more and more, particularly in political discourse, but in other areas as well, when something happens, that event is then reported in the media. But what is conveyed about that event may differ, depending on where and to whom it is reported. So many factors come into play in the conveyance of information about that single event. There is the backstory to that event, the event itself, and the ramifications. All interpreted through the personal or collective positions, beliefs, and biases of whoever is reporting it. The exact same event, reported on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC can, and often do, end up being conveyed in very different ways. Giving those receiving the information very different impressions and understandings of what is going on. Hence the proliferation of what has come to be termed “fake news.” All conveyed through a variety of media sources on the vast array of electronic devices that have become virtual extensions of ourselves.

But the issues with communication—and miscommunication—is not something that is unique to our modern electronic age. As we see in our Gospel reading, many of the same issues were prevalent 2,000 years ago. And even long before. As long as humans have been communicating, we've also had the potential for miscommunicating.

Our Gospel reading for today is a continuation of the passage from last week, which deals with Jesus' identity. More specifically, communication regarding that identity. And some miscommunication about that same identity. To recap, in last week's reading, Jesus asked the

disciples: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Okay, a communication of basic information, albeit a misunderstanding of the facts. So, seeking to correct the misunderstanding, Jesus then asks his disciples, those who should know better than anyone, “But who do you say that I am?” To which Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Ding, ding, ding! Correct answer. Now we’re on the same page, right?.

Wrong. As we see in today’s continuation of that conversation, now that his true identity is on the table, Jesus takes the opportunity to lay out what this identity means and how that determines what happens moving forward. “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Jesus has some critical information he needs to convey to the Twelve. Which he does in concise terms. They should be able to clearly understand just what this means. Well, with the possible exception of the part about being raised, but that’s another issue. While Jesus stated the pure facts of what is going to happen, there was a fundamental problem with this exercise in communication. One having to do with basic assumptions.

In response to Jesus’ revelation, “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’” Now certainly, part of Peter’s response was purely personal, an expression of his love and devotion to Jesus. No one wants to hear that someone they care about and admire will undergo suffering, let alone death. So, Peter’s emotional outburst is quite understandable, even moving. On one level. But there is more to this reaction, one that is not explicitly conveyed. One that is based on Peter’s unspoken assumptions undergirding his previous response to Jesus: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

It all boils down to assumptions about what it means to be the Messiah. As we’ve talked before, the prevailing understanding at that time was that the Messiah would be a great warrior king who would rise up, liberate the people from their oppression—in this case, oppression by the Roman Empire—and reconstitute the ancient United Kingdom of Israel and Judah. A leader in the model of King David. A leader who would usher in a new golden age, not unlike that experienced under the leadership of David and his son Solomon. A vision that the people had been holding on to for centuries. A collective vision and understanding of Messiah that had shaped Peter’s worldview. The assumption, belief, and perspective that informed his confession of faith in who Jesus is as the Messiah.

And it was all wrong. It was all a great misunderstanding. And Jesus wastes no time in telling Peter as much: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Now, to be clear, in referring to Peter as Satan, Jesus was not meaning to imply that Peter is in any way evil. He was likely using the ancient, Old Testament understanding of Satan. Not as the embodiment of evil, but of *ha-satan*, a heavenly prosecutor who tests the loyalty of God’s followers. Perhaps implying that Peter is challenging, testing, Jesus’ understanding of Messiah. And in so doing, is placing a stumbling block before Jesus, seeking to deter him from doing what needs to be done. In response, Jesus is challenging Peter’s assumptions and saying his understanding is contrary to

God's vision. That, despite his personal feelings on the matter, Peter needs to get on the right track, that he needs to get behind Jesus, to support him, to follow him in what is to come. After all, Jesus has just named Peter as his righthand man, as the rock, the foundation, on which this whole venture will rest following Jesus' death and resurrection. If Peter is not on-board, then we have a problem.

Jesus then turns to the remaining disciples, bringing them into the conversation. In so doing, he also brings all who follow him—including us—into the conversation. By seeking to disabuse them of their own mistaken understandings of Messiah, bringing them in line with the real plan: "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 will find it."

Of course, Jesus is not saying that they too need to go the cross, as he will. After all, he will go to the cross precisely so that they do not have to. In this context, the cross he would have them take up is more metaphorical, working in concert with denial. Denying one thing and taking up something new in its place. That they and all who follow Jesus are to deny, to turn from, to get rid of, whatever it is that hinders them from faithfully following him. Whatever it is that prevents them from being able to support Jesus in what he must do; what he is destined to do. That they need to set aside their own assumptions and ideas about how things should be. The cross that they are to take up is the sometimes-uncomfortable truth of what the life of faith entails.

Failure to do so only serves as a stumbling block to true faith, to truly understanding who Jesus is. To fully embracing the new life he opens for us. That in choosing to follow him, yes, we are asked to give up our old way of life. We are asked to be open to a different way of being, a different way of living, that is in itself often counter to the ways of the rest of society. A way of life that is increasingly unpopular. But Jesus promises that to do so, while not always an easy path, leads to salvation and new life.

So much of our communication, so much of how we view life, so much of how we live our lives, is influenced by our assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives. It is all too easy to hold on to those, as if they are an inextricable part of who we are. What Jesus seeks to teach his followers is that sometimes, we just don't have the whole picture. Or maybe we hold erroneous or misguided assumptions. What he asks us to is to be open. To be open to possibilities. Even if those possibilities, at first glance, may be hard to fathom or be inconsistent with previously held beliefs or perspectives. And that we be open to getting rid of some old assumptions about reality and be open to a new way of life. Life in which, counterintuitively, our Messiah suffers and dies as the means of destroying sin and death. Enduring the unimaginable so we don't have to. And that through his equally inexplicable rising from the dead, we too are gifted those same benefits. Being invited by our Messiah to get behind him and follow him into new life. Which is the ultimate communication of his unbounded love for us.