

Matthew 16: 21-28, Year A 2026

This week, we are dropped right in the middle of the story with our Gospel reading. We pick up where we left off with last week's reading, and while I'm not normally in the habit of critiquing the lectionary and the people who pick what we read on Sundays, I do hate that we split this story over two weeks. We really cannot understand one without the other. So here is a little recap of last Sunday's Gospel for those who might need it. In it, Jesus and his disciples share a really bright moment together. Jesus wants to know what people are saying about his ministry. Specifically Jesus wants to know who people are saying he is. Peter, in a remarkable moment of divine clarity and insight, says that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. It's a big moment for him and the other disciples. It shows that they are starting to get it, to understand just how special and important this ministry that they are in the middle of is. Peter learns that he will become the rock upon which the future church will be built, the foundation for future generations of Christians. If the story last week were to end there, it would have been a nice, feel-good moment between Jesus and his closest friends, a rare moment where the disciples seem to understand what they are doing. But the end of the Gospel reading hinted at things to come, closing with the line that Jesus tells his disciples, sternly, that they are not to tell anyone what they have just learned about who Jesus is.

That's a strange little line, one we puzzled over in the women's Bible study last week. The disciples have just learned something incredible, that Jesus, their friend, mentor, and teacher is, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah, that God's plan of salvation and redemption is finally fully in motion. This is fantastic news, the best news! But instead of sharing that with the adoring crowds that Jesus and the disciples can never seem to escape from or with the Pharisees who are drawing ever closer, becoming ever more menacing, Jesus tells them they must keep this news to

themselves. If they could tell people this news, if they could prove who Jesus really is, everything would be better, easier for them. Instead Jesus orders them to keep it a secret. “Why?” is absolutely the right question to ask.

Now, a week later, we finally start to get an answer to that question. For the disciples, learning that Jesus is the Messiah is only part of the story. The disciples must now learn what that Messiahship actually means. Jesus knows that they are not yet prepared for what his role as the Messiah will truly entail.

Our Gospel reading this morning picks up where we last Sunday left off. It serves as a turning point in Matthew’s Gospel. This first verse marks a shift in Jesus’s ministry, Jesus’ first revelation to the disciples that the path they are embarking on might not be what they originally thought. “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...” that he must be killed and raised again on the third day. It’s hard for us who have heard the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection so many times to fully comprehend how shocking it must have been for the disciples to hear this for the first time, that their idea of the Messiah would be so very different from the reality of Jesus’s ministry. We get a little taste of their shock in the words and actions of blessed Peter, who has the audacity to pull Jesus aside and rebuke *him*, like Peter is the one who has the right to rebuke his Lord. We can feel Peter’s incredulity leaping off the page even two thousand years later, as he tells Jesus that his suffering and death cannot be allowed to happen. Of course, Jesus will let no one, not even his friend, not even the future foundation of the Church, as Peter has just learned he will be, deter him from the path God has set before him. Jesus puts Peter back into his place, reminding him who is Lord and who is disciple in words that are harsh, but direct. Peter is the rock of the Church, not a stumbling block for Christ.

The disciples just don't get it yet, and that's why they can't yet tell others about Jesus as the Messiah. They are so clouded by their own goals, by their own desires for what they wish God was doing that they cannot see what God is actually doing. They don't understand, not yet, how different Jesus is from their expectations of who the Messiah would be. Jesus's ministry will be countercultural, almost paradoxical. How Jesus chooses to wield power, how Jesus goes about changing the world will be so very different from what the disciples expect. The true Messiah is no conquering king, but a suffering servant, no powerful, forceful ruler, but a humble, gentle carpenter. Jesus will not command armies. He will not overthrow kings. Instead, he will choose love, not coercion. He will choose to welcome, not exclude. He will choose invitation over intimidation. Ultimately, Jesus will follow God to the cross, not an earthly throne.

Our Gospel reading today reminds us how different Jesus is, how counter to our understanding of how the world works. And our Gospel also reminds us that anyone who wishes to be a true follower of Christ must also seek and embrace a life that also runs counter to the kingdoms of the world. In Jesus' life, we have an example of what it looks like to live a life based on God's values, rather than earthly values. The world tells us that only through self-centeredness and self-promotion can we get ahead. Only through the pursual of our own wants and goals above all else can we get what we want, need, and deserve. The world seems to reward selfishness and the relentless pursual of power as the only means to get ahead in life.

Jesus's own life insists there is a different way, a better way, one that runs counter to the teachings of the world, but one that leads to a life that is richer, fuller, more abundant, and more focused on God's kingdom than ours. Our relationship with Christ encourages us to be kind, humble, peaceful, joyous, and open-hearted, to be generous and merciful and forgiving, even to a fault. It might seem silly, even absurd to keep clinging to goodness and light and love in a world

that is so often mired in darkness and division. But, as Paul reminds us, evil cannot be driven out by more and more evil. If goodness is ever to win, goodness will necessarily have to be sown into the world. We cannot hope to be part of God's ongoing redemption plan if we keep valuing only earthly things over and above heavenly ones.

So no, in our Gospel reading today we see that the disciples didn't yet get it, how different the real ministry of Jesus would be from their expectations, how different the goals and values of the kingdom of heaven will be from those of the kingdoms of the earth. That may offer us some solace, because we, likely, don't get it either. But there is always hope. There is always the promise that if we keep choosing to live our lives close to God, if we keep showing up with God, keep bringing our whole selves with our limited understanding and open hearts, God will continue transforming us into people who can better understand how different the world could be, how different God would like the world to be, and how we can be part of God's plan to make the world, and our very lives, more like what it should be.

Catholic theologian and priest Richard Rohr once wrote that once we know God's big picture, we can never go back to our little one. This is the work of decentering the self so that we can recenter God, of emptying the self so that God has space to fill us up with things that actually give us life. Like the disciples, we too may be surprised by the results of God's plans, especially when they run counter to the way the world teaches us to live. In fact, we pray we are surprised, daily, by just how much better God's plans are than ours. And I pray that we have the courage to give up our own plans so that we can follow those of God.