

The Jesus Secret

Sermon preached at
Foundry United Methodist Church
by Rev. Dean Snyder
on Sunday, August 25, 2002

Matthew 16: 13-21

Before we turn to Scripture, let me give you a quick report on what Jane and I did on our summer vacation. We spent a week on the eastern shore, riding our bicycles and paddling our canoe and enjoying the absolutely beautiful countryside. Then we shifted gears and spent some time in Manhattan, watching plays and going to museums.

On the eastern shore we worshiped at Wingate United Methodist Church in the (don't blink or you'll miss it) town of Wingate, Maryland. There were 21 people at worship. The minister is a part-time local pastor who serves four churches. He arrived after worship had started, preached his sermon, and left before the service was over to make it on time to his next church.

The Sunday we attended turned out to be a special Sunday because of the special music. Special music for the service was provided by the local Republican candidate for the Maryland House of Delegates. She doesn't talk politics in church, but she sings solos in little United Methodist churches throughout the eastern shore, one after another, every campaign season.

Next Sunday we worshiped at Metropolitan-Duane United Methodist Church in Manhattan, a couple subway stops away from the site of the World Trade Center towers. Metropolitan-Duane is a multi-cultural, reconciling congregation, that runs a food program that has become essential to those economically impacted by last September 11 in their community. One of the members rode to church on his roller blades, and when the pastor invited people to participate in a healing ritual, he roller bladed right up the aisle of the church to be anointed with oil. The church's pastor Rev. Takayuki Ishii preached a sermon that I thought was pretty hard on the current White House, I must say.

Wingate United Methodist Church in rural, rural Maryland, Metropolitan-Duane United Methodist Church in one of the most densely populated neighborhoods of Manhattan. They are very different congregations - very different people in some ways. But they are connected with each other and with us by the particular institutional expression of the Christianity called the United Methodist Church.

After our vacation church experiences, I am more convinced than ever that in a polarized nation and world, faith connections -- like the United Methodist Church -- that hold together, in a common commitment to Jesus Christ, people who are radically different philosophically, culturally, politically and emotionally are the hope of the world.

Our giving of our time, talent and resources to the work of our denomination keeps the people Wingate United Methodist Church and the people of Metropolitan-Duane United Methodist Church connected in a gigantic network of mission, ministry, prayer and communication. So I appreciate your support for the

connectional ministries of our denomination.

Let us pray: Speak to us, O God, through your word that we become better, more loving people than we would otherwise be. In Christ's name. Amen.

According to the first three gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus again and again tells his disciples and others to keep his identity a secret.

Since the German biblical scholar William Wrede wrote a book about it 101 years ago, the phenomena has been called "the messianic secret." Jesus seems determined to keep his true identity a secret.

The theme appears at one of highest moments of drama in the New Testament (aside from the crucifixion and resurrection stories): Peter's confession -- the incident that takes place at Caesarea Philippi, which is repeated in all three synoptic gospels and which is their dramatic center.

Who do you say that I am? Jesus asks his disciples. The disciple Simon Peter (whom the Bible does not portray as a rocket scientist) yet, here Peter somehow gets it right. "You are the messiah -- the Christ -- the son of the living God," he answers.

Jesus is pleased by his answer. On this rock, Jesus says, I will built my church. And then once again, as he has before and as he will again, Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anybody who he is.

The Gospel of Matthew puts it even more starkly: "Jesus (it says) sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anybody that he was the messiah."

What is this about? Why does Jesus want his messiahship - his Christhood - kept a secret?

Biblical scholars have come up with a dozen theories: from those who argue that Jesus was practicing reverse psychology (telling people to keep something a secret being, according to this theory, the surest way to get them to spread it) to those who have argued that the messianic secret didn't really originate with Jesus himself but is a literary device used by the gospel writers to build suspense.

I am convinced by the writings of Eduard Schweizer, H. Conzelmann and others who believe that, whatever Jesus may have said about this, the gospel writers used the messianic secret theme to emphasize that Jesus' messiahship had to be kept hidden until the end of the story, because no one can really understand what it means to call Jesus the messiah, or the Christ, until after the crucifixion.

On the cross Jesus redefines what it means to be a savior, what it means to be a king, what it means to be a Christ, what it means to be the son of God. And what Jesus does on the cross is so radical, that you shouldn't even try to understand who he really is until after you get to that part of the story.

But I believe something more is going on here as well. Part of the reason the synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke (John is a different ball game) - part of the reason these gospels were written 50 years, maybe more, after the events they describe is because the early church was trying to come to grips with the emergence of a global, universal, inclusive church - something the first generation of Jewish Christians never expected.

So part of the reason the gospel writers emphasize the messianic secret, I believe, is because they are saying that they themselves did not even understand Jesus fully until the church that came into being following Jesus' death and resurrection grew from a little Jewish sect into a global movement that transcended ethnicity, group and family -- a movement, as the Apostle Paul put it, in which there was neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male nor female.

Usually the fact that the gospels weren't written until a generation or more after Jesus' death and resurrection is used to question their believability, but I really believe the gospels could not have been written any earlier than that because nobody really understood the significance of Jesus' life until after this unprecedented reality of a global, universal, inclusive church had begun to emerge.

Part of the reason the gospel writers emphasized the messianic secret is because who Jesus was was, to some degree, a secret to them until they began to see the enormous scope of the implications of his life and death and resurrection.

And I think there are even greater implications of this messianic secret: who Jesus is is still a secret to us today 2000 years later. We do not yet, even now, fully understand the significance and meaning and final implications of Jesus' messiahship - neither in our personal lives nor in our world.

At the time the gospels were being written, the gospel writers were beginning to understand that Jesus was redeeming humanity from the division between Jew and gentile, breaking down the wall of animosity between gentile and Jew, as the Book of Acts puts it. But, while they may have had a vague glimpse of what was to come, they did not really understand yet that the messiahship of Jesus meant the end of the human institution of slavery. That part of Jesus' messiahship was still a secret from them.

They had a vague glimpse of it but they surely didn't understand that the messiahship of Jesus transformed the relationship of women and men and freed women from the status of property. That was still a secret to them.

They had a vague glimpse of it but they had no real sense that the messiahship of Jesus would transform our understanding of learning, health and healing, the value of individual life and democracy.

Much of Jesus' messiahship was still a secret to them even while they were trying to figure it out and describe it in the gospels they wrote. And I think they were suggesting to us that we ought to assume that the meaning of Jesus' messiahship - his Christhood is still hidden from us.

There are oppressions that Jesus has liberated us from that we haven't even realize yet that we are oppressed by.

But to receive Jesus as our messiah and Christ means that we will go with him into places we don't even begin to grasp yet, just as Matthew, Mark and Luke were going into this frightening, exhilarating experience of table fellowship with uncircumcised, non-kosher gentiles, which they had come to believe was part of Jesus' messiahship, even if it had been previously hidden from them - a secret.

Jesus is going to liberate us from oppression, free us from sins, transform our world in ways we have not even begun to imagine yet.

The messianic secret is still secret. We are called not to implement a strategy that been perfected but to be part of a reality adventure when we are not sure of all the twists and turns yet but know God is up top something pretty amazing in Jesus Christ.

We don't trust Jesus because we fully understand him and know what the final implications of his Christhood is. We trust Jesus because he is Jesus the Christ and has called us to follow him.

And, as I think this applies to the work of God throughout history, I also think it applies to our personal lives. Jesus is still a secret to me.

My friend Bob is visiting me this weekend. Bob is my oldest and closest friend in the world, next to Jane, and he probably knows things about me even Jane doesn't.

I talk to Bob about things I don't talk to anybody else about. We sat up until 4 a.m. in the morning the other night talking.

And I found myself telling Bob about how over the past couple years I had begun to think more about dying. And I told him that I have begun to get this creepy feeling in my stomach when I imagine myself as one day gone from here.

At 4 a.m. in the morning, Bob and I sat and talked about what it feels like to begin to realize in our gut that one day we will die.

And it occurred to me that there are aspects of my relationship to Jesus, at 55 years of age, that are still a secret to me. I thought that by now, I would be spiritually accomplished. I'd be there.

But, since talking to Bob until 4 a.m., I've begun to think that there is a lot about Jesus that I still have to learn in my inner most being. The meaning of his messiahship for my life, finally during this next stretch, is still a secret to me. I suspect some of the most difficult and most precious depths of my relationship with Christ are still to come.

Jesus is still saving me. My salvation is still a secret being revealed. And will be until The day I see him face to face.