

THE POWER OF CHRIST

Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel suggests that Jesus was taking what you might call a "step-back moment" in his life. A brief pause. A few minutes to stop and evaluate how his ministry was going up to that point. He had been traveling around with his disciples, observing, teaching, listening and encouraging. Reaching out to people and bringing God's love to them. A divine power was being released into the world through him—an energy that included a passion for justice, healing and compassion for all people, and acceptance for the unacceptable. Yes, something special was happening through the ministry of Jesus. But even when good things are happening, it's beneficial to take a breather once in a while and do some self-reflection, asking things like: "Am I accomplishing what I set out to do? Am I still on track to accomplish my goal? Should I carry on and stay the course, or shift gears and change direction and tactics?"

And the most important question of all, "What is God's will for me, and where exactly is God calling me to go at this time?"

I think that's at least one of the things Jesus was doing when he began to ask the disciples some reflective questions. First, "What are people saying about me?"

I think that's a legitimate and appropriate question. If I were Jesus, I'd be curious about that myself. After several years spent preaching, teaching and healing, he wanted to survey the people who had been with him during it all. So Jesus asked the disciples, what's the word on the street about me? "Who do people—the general public out there—say the Son of Man is?"

In response, the disciples began rattling off the results of the most recent public opinion polls. "A certain percentage of people are saying you're John the Baptist, or at least you're like John the Baptist. "Others think you're the second coming of the great prophet Elijah, who never tasted death and God carried up to heaven in a whirlwind, and we Jews are expecting his return to earth before the great and terrible day of the Lord. "And still others believe you're on a par with the great prophets of our faith, such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, and you have come to speak out against the Roman occupiers and usher in the liberation of the Jewish people. In other words, people are excited about you and want to put your face on Mount Rushmore along with other important Jewish teachers

and mystics. So keep it up, Jesus, because you're really making a name for yourself! You're starting to go places! Isn't that great?

It would have been so easy to stop there and bask in the warm glow of all those compliments. These days we would say that Jesus was trending; his teaching sessions and miraculous healings had gone viral. He had a rapidly growing number of friends on *Facebook*. He had thousands of Twitter followers who looked forward to his every tweet. It all looked very positive. What more could Jesus want? But Jesus wasn't taking a popularity poll. Rather, he was trying to take his disciples to a deeper place. And that's why he turned to them and asked a more penetrating question.

"Who do you say that I am?" You've been traveling around with me for a while now. What's your take on my identity and what I've been trying to do here these past few years?" That's when Peter, always impetuous, always ready with a quick answer, responded, "You are the Messiah. The Christ. The Son of the Living God." Peter was right, of course. He was spot on. But then Jesus did a funny thing. He told Peter and the rest of the disciples not to tell anyone he was the Christ.

What was the reasoning behind that? Why did Jesus put the brakes on Peter's excellent and accurate answer? Why didn't he tell his disciples to go out and shout it from the rooftops? It's a puzzle, to be sure. But I think what Jesus did suggests that a person—in this particular case, Peter—can say the right theological words but not have the right theological understanding of those words. Because when you say the words, you really should have a grasp on their meaning and what the implications of them are.

When it comes to faith—I'm talking genuine faith—words usually have little value; but their meaning is everything. Peter knew the right words when he said that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God; but Jesus knew that he didn't have a good enough grasp on their meaning or the repercussions of them. Which begs the question, what does it mean to say that Jesus is the Christ?

Let me share what may be for you a different perspective about that, for your consideration.

The word "Christ," you see, isn't just a person. It's not merely a title of respect. And it's not, as many people assume, the last name of Jesus. No, "Christ" is a word for the divine power that was released into the world through the life of Jesus. Just as stars explode in the universe and create new planets, so in the life of Jesus a certain *dynamis*, a divine energy more powerful than a nuclear blast, was released into the world. And this energy is still changing people today, two thousand years later.

The dynamic “Christ-power” Jesus wielded was nothing less than the power and presence of God. And by that power, God’s mercy and compassion exploded into the world; unconditional love and inexhaustible grace were poured out on humankind; and a glorious vision of God’s Kingdom of righteousness, justice and *shalom* of were let loose on earth. All of this came to us through the life of Jesus. So much divine energy and power was released into the world through Jesus’ life that even today it continues to shape, recreate and transform the world, one heart, one mind, one person, and one community at a time.

So, what’s our answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?” We can proclaim, as Peter did, that “He is the Messiah. The Christ. The Son of the Living God.” The thing is, saying Jesus is the Christ is easy. We can speak those words with hardly a thought or effort behind it. The question is, can we feel the power, the dynamos, behind those words? Because it’s that Christ energy, still pulsating throughout the world, that matters most.

I came across a story that I hope helps to illustrate this powerful, life-transforming divine power that Jesus set loose in the world. Several years ago there was a woman who lived alone. She was very ill, dying of AIDS. It would be hard to exaggerate how depressed and despairing she felt. A friend of hers was so concerned, she asked a priest to stop by and visit the woman.

Now, I can tell you from personal experience that when someone asks a clergy person to visit someone else, it doesn’t always work well. But fortunately, in this case, it did work. The woman was very candid and forthcoming with the priest. “Look,” she said, “I know all too well that I’ve made a mess of my life. I’ve made many mistakes, the worst of which I’m now paying the ultimate price for. And if I know how bad I’ve been, God certainly knows it, too. So, how can God forgive me?”

The priest listened, then he said to her, “God is willing to forgive anyone, anytime, for anything. What we need to do is trust and believe by opening our hearts and being receptive to God’s grace, so it can come close enough for us to receive it.”

The woman responded, “I think I’m beyond being able to believe that.” At that very moment the priest happened to notice a picture of a pretty young girl on the woman’s bedroom dresser. She looked to be around twelve years old. He asked the woman, “Who is that little girl in the picture?” For the first time in the conversation the woman smiled. She said, “That’s my daughter. She’s the only beautiful thing I have left in my life.”

The priest asked, “Tell me, if your daughter made mistakes and did things that were bad, and she was broken and hurting because of those mistakes and

bad things, would you forgive her? Would you pull her close to you and still love her? Would you still want her to be in your life?"

The woman whispered, "Yes. Yes. Of course I would."

Then the priest made a wonderfully astute theological connection. He said, "I want you to know that God has a picture of you on His dresser. God keeps it there because God still loves you and wants to be with you in life—and in death." The dying woman finally got it! She finally understood and believed that God's love was for her as much as for anyone else, whether they were a saint or a sinner. And that belief helped to comfort and reassure her in her darkest moments.

What the priest told that terminally ill woman was, in essence, the same powerful, life-transforming message that Jesus proclaimed and shared with the world. That you are a child of God. You are a citizen of God's Kingdom. God loves you, and God forgives you. And in that sense, it was the power of Christ at work in the priest's compassionate visit, in his encouraging, inspiring words, and in the photograph of the dying woman's beautiful, beloved twelve-year-old daughter.

I believe the power of Christ—which goes much further and means much more than just saying Jesus is the Christ—is very much present and active today, in our world. In this church. And in the hearts of you and me. So, how and where do we use that divine power today?

Each time we treat another person with the dignity and respect every child of God deserves; each time we show compassion to another human being who is hurting and whose life is in tatters; every time we choose the way of love as our way of life and do it in Jesus' name, we're radiating and sharing the power Christ with others, and the same dynamism that was generated centuries ago in the life and ministry of Jesus is carried on through us, in our time and place.

An Italian writer named Ignazio Silone wrote this simple yet profound statement in one of his books: "If we treat one another in the same way that Jesus treated people, it will be as if Jesus never left this world."

That's really what the power of Christ is for us today, my friends. It's treating people the way Jesus treated people—sharing God's love with them, sharing God's grace and mercy by the way we treat them; and proclaiming the good news of God's future kingdom of justice and peace, while living as though God's Kingdom has already come.

Let me close my message this morning with some words from writer and deeply spiritual Catholic priest Thomas Merton. Merton said that Jesus was like a great magnifying glass, and "through him the light of God came into the world

in a concentrated and beautiful way; and when we place our dry, brittle lives under that light, the soul of each person shines bright with newness.”

That was Thomas Merton’s way of saying that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and Christ’s power is still pulsating in the world today and transforming lives. He was referring to the reality and existence of a divine energy that began in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, was gloriously revealed through his death on the cross and resurrection, was let loose in the world at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came, and continues in the world even now, in our hearts and in the hearts of all who follow Christ.

And that’s the deeper, existential meaning that Peter didn’t understand when he declared that Jesus was “the Messiah. The Christ. The Son of the Living God.” The words were there, and he said them just fine; but Peter didn’t get the deeper, much more significant meaning of those words and the divine power behind them.

So my prayer for us and for our church is that, whenever we proclaim Jesus is Lord, we will get the full meaning of that statement, comprehend the *dynamos* behind it, and let the power of Christ be our power, as well. Amen.