

Sermon for May 8, 2022

Shivon Miller

“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” the people say to Jesus. And Jesus answers them, “I have told you and you do not believe.”

This Mother’s Day I had to giggle – how many parents have had this moment with their child. The child standing seemingly clueless about something you are sure you have made crystal clear a thousand times. “I have told you” you reply with indignation “but you wouldn’t believe it.” And many a parent continues - or maybe you weren’t listening? Or maybe you simply didn’t really want to hear it? After all if you hear it and believe it, you might have to alter your actions.

Had Jesus really been keeping these religious leaders in suspense about being the Messiah? Why did they not believe it? Or weren’t they really listening? Or maybe they simply didn’t really want to hear it. After all if they hear it and believe it, they might have to alter their actions.

But listen carefully to what the people are really asking for – “tell us plainly.” Tell us “plainly.” Tell us simply, clearly, to the point. Are you the Messiah and what does this mean?

This encounter in which the people ask Jesus to “tell them plainly” is found in the book of John. The book that begins “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Plain, simple, clear - right?

The Messiah, the Savior of the world, is not easily plainly told. Our language seems inadequate, our human understanding too limited. We lack the imagination to grab hold of even a glimpse. We don’t want to be kept in suspense, we want to know plainly, to have clear, simple, concise nailed down words to define the Messiah and articulate our faith.

How many of us have longed for the neon sign to drop from the heavens with “plain speech” that makes crystal clear who God is and what God desires.

We are living in a culture that wants thing to be told “plainly” – we long for clear, concise, one way roads of faith. We want simple answers that can be quickly adopted and regurgitated; well defined boundaries and roles. We want to be able to say this is exactly who God is and exactly what the Word of God says “plainly.”

Listen carefully to how Jesus responds to this request for “plain” speech. Jesus says “I have told you...*The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.*” Jesus does not give “plain speech” to reveal himself as Messiah, instead he points the people to the testimony of his actions. So far in the book of John, Jesus has called the disciples to “Come and see”. He has turned water into wine and the guests have tasted. He has sat beside the woman at the well, listening to her

and offering her drink from the waters of life. He waited with her as she invited others to “Come and see.” He has healed those outside the faith and healed on the Sabbath. He has blessed and broken the bread and fed the multitude. He has walked on water. He has positioned himself beside an adulterous woman and challenged those who condemn, inviting the sinless to throw the first stone. He has returned sight to the blind and invited the Pharisees to wonder about their own blindness.

In response to the request for “plain speech,” Jesus points them to the testimony of his actions and then continues saying “My sheep hear my voice. I know them and *they follow me.*” Jesus invites people to follow – to come into an experience of the works that are done in his Father’s name. Following as Jesus acts, the experiences in following, will testify in a way that “plain speech” is not able to encapsulate the mystery of God, the Messiah.

After all, isn’t the most effective parenting done not with words but through example? Isn’t it when the child is invited into the experience themselves that they are most likely to hear, to believe, what they have been told?

A Jesuit priest, Anthony DeMello, tells this parable: A person leaves his home village to explore the faraway and exotic Amazon. When he returns to his village, the villagers are captivated as the explorer tries to describe his many experiences, along with the incredible beauty of the place, with its thundering waterfalls, beautiful foliage, and extraordinary wildlife. How can he put into words the feelings that flooded his heart when he heard the night sounds of the forest or sensed the dangers of the rapids? So he tells them they simply must go to the Amazon themselves. To help them with their journey, the explorer draws a map. Immediately the villagers pounce on the map. They copy the map, so that everyone can have his or her own copy. They frame the map for their town hall and their homes. Regularly they study the map and discuss it often, until the villagers consider themselves experts on the Amazon – for do they not know the location of every waterfall and rapids, every turn and bend?

Too often we seek the map, make the map “plain” and simple and believe that enables us to speak of the Amazon.

Jesus invites us to “Come and see.” Follow and live into the actions that testify to the Messiah. The people asked Jesus, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” And Jesus answers them, “I have told you and you do not believe.”

We often struggle to believe, or maybe to hear, or maybe to want to hear because it may require action on our part. We might simply desire the “plain language” that we can adopt and regurgitate. But what if we followed and really experienced for ourselves the testimony – the taste of the miracle on our tongue, the awareness of Jesus’ presence with us at the waters of life, in the action of inviting others to come and see, in the work of healing, in the act of feeding, in challenging today’s Sabbath restrictions and condemnations, in claiming our blindness and having our eyes opened anew? Better than plain speech, experience the Messiah and believe.