

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 13, 2015

“Don't Keep It Secret”

Scripture: Mark 8:27-38; 16 Pentecost B (Proper 19)

Note: Preached on the first Sunday of the program year and the day of the parish Ministries Fair

So, if we Christians are supposed to be able to keep a secret, we're doing a pretty lousy job, don't you think? Jesus asks his followers who they think he is; Peter blurts out that Jesus is the Messiah; Jesus says to tell no one. Yet here we sit on the corner of 50th and Wooddale in a striking and attractive building welcoming people to come inside where they will hear a lot about Jesus the Messiah. We have a flashy electronic sign letting every passerby know to come on in when we gather for worship. Today we can experience a *Ministries Fair* where anyone can learn all about what we do as St. Stephen's Church, because we believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Websites, Christmas services, Sunday School, Bible Studies. Gosh, I *hope* that people get the point that we believe Jesus is the Messiah. And all this after the man himself says: “Don't tell anybody about me.”

So, what happened? How did we go from “tell no one” to “tell everyone”? What changed to get us into this role of being sort of... divine blabbermouths? Well, for one thing, we started to *understand*.

So, walk with me for a minute here along the dusty streets in the villages near Caesarea Philippi. First, just notice the name of the region we are visiting. Caesarea: Caesar, as in the Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar. And Philippi: as in King Phillip II, son of King Herod the Great. Yes, these two men are fashioned in their own right as messiahs, saviors of their people, because they are powerful rulers... emperors, kings, with armies and territories, palaces, temples, riches and honor. Whole cities named just for them, just to remind us how great and powerful they truly are. Then, along side us comes Jesus shuffling down the dusty roads on foot with a ragged bunch of followers, people likely smelly and dishevelled and of no great account. And when we overhear one of those followers impetuously name Jesus “the Messiah”, it would have to be worth a chuckle. The Messiah for whom Jesus’ followers hoped would be the man who would save them from the tyranny of the Romans, from people like Augustus and Phillip, in whose villages they wandered. The Messiah would be the one who would restore power and honor and respect to the beaten down nation of Israel, drive out the Roman Empire and all its corruption and religious idolatry, and usher in a period of peace and prosperity. Yet this man Jesus has nothing. No riches, no army, no palace, no power. No wonder he tells everyone to be quiet about him. Caesar might be a messiah; even King Phillip might want to believe himself a messiah. But Jesus? How can he be Messiah, the one who saves us?

So, now I'm going to be a blabbermouth, and I'm going to tell you how. Jesus tried to tell his followers that day so long ago, but Peter, at least, wouldn't listen to anything about Jesus being belittled by others or dying or rising to new life. I hope we will. See, the Messiah, the Savior, wouldn't raise an army to defeat the Roman legions. The Messiah wouldn't take the throne from King Phillip. In fact, the Messiah wouldn't even really sway the rulers of his own people much. The Messiah wouldn't eliminate all harm. The Messiah wouldn't love some people more than others. The Messiah wouldn't answer every question, avenge every grudge, remove every sickness, or make everyone rich. What the Messiah would do is enter the madness and the beauty of the human enterprise, and teach us the way to live. What the Messiah would do is give his life entirely to the cause of love and forgiveness, so we could learn to do the same. What the Messiah would do is ask his followers to share their lives with others who need them, to offer good news ---"Gospel"--- to people who need something good. What the Messiah would do is fail to perpetuate an incessant flirtation with power, greed, war, self-importance, and fear of death. *"Take up your cross and follow me," says Jesus, the Messiah. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."* With this Messiah, we gain in our lives through what we give of our lives. Any of us, all of us, from whatever position of weakness or of power we occupy, from whatever race or culture we come, whoever we might have been before, to whatever we are called to be now. Jesus, the Messiah, lives for us and with us, so we might live for and

with others. We can't fix everything. But we can do some things... Share. Forgive. Hope in God. Comfort the sick. Pray for the troubled. Speak truth to power and hold leaders accountable for the well-being of others. Notice the sad, the downtrodden, and lend a hand. Take up ministry within and outside the community of faith. Be willing to be inconvenienced when it is the right thing to do. Take up your cross; not my cross, not someone else's idea of your cross. Learn the ways of Jesus, the Messiah, and see to your own ministry, and do it.

You know, I said earlier that Christians aren't so good at keeping a secret, but I'm afraid sometimes that maybe we are. I wonder if in this age in which we live, when "Christian" can be a word that engenders hatred and fear and judgmentalism and rejection, I wonder if we ought not be a little more forward about what we know about the Messiah, a little less private and secret, a little more willing to speak out about Jesus, who loves us and welcomes us to his table. I know we don't all feel like we're good at it, and I don't think we need to wear our faith on our sleeves to show off to everyone. But I don't think we can just wear it under our skins either. "Who do you say I am?" asks Jesus. I know he asks this of his disciples in his own time, but the truth is I think he still asks it of us who are his followers in this day. We need to have an answer. The day will come when you will share it. Our church, our ministries fair, our youth programs, our pastoral care, our worship, our service projects... these are different from other such programs in the world, because we do

them as *ministries* in the name of the one who saves us from hatred and bigotry and anxiety and selfishness, our Messiah, Jesus. That, I trust, we will never keep secret.