

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

August 31, 2008

Star Pupil

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Acts 18:14-25; Matthew 16:13-25

The Apostle Peter moves to the head of the class with a discerning and timely answer to the question Jesus poses. “Who do you say that I am?” This is a question which echoes down through the ages. It’s a question that continues to animate discussion and create debate. It’s a question that we must answer, too.

Still, it’s surprising how the disciples stumble when they first are asked. They all seem eager to agree that Jesus is a prophet and a part of a great tradition that includes Elijah and Jeremiah and John the Baptist. However, they are not ready to say much more than that despite the many months, even years, they have spent listening to and observing Jesus up close, in settings public and private. Then Peter steps forward with a novel and daring response, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” We do not know if Peter has thought about this for a long time and only at this moment gives voice to a feeling that has been growing within him, or if this is the very first time the idea has come to him and impetuously he has blurted out, “You are the Messiah!”

No matter how long it’s taken for the thought to form, it is an extraordinarily perceptive answer, divinely inspired. “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,” Jesus says, “but my Father in heaven.” Most importantly, it is the right answer.

Peter, no doubt, feels very good about himself. He’s not only given the right answer, he is the star pupil in the Gospel School. Jesus promises to build his church on the rock of Peter,

entrusting him with the very keys to the kingdom. Then, as the lesson ends, Jesus gives an unexpected command. “Tell no one.” “Tell no one that Jesus is the Messiah.”

As readers, we are left scratching our heads. Why does Jesus tell the disciples to keep quiet? If the truth is known, why not let it out? We find out quickly as the story unfolds a bit more: although Peter has the right answer, he does not yet understand its meaning. Partial knowledge, you see, is a dangerous thing.

You may have heard a little story I came across some years ago. It seems that there was a nasty wreck out on a foggy highway. Traffic came to a halt. The drivers of most of the nearby cars seemed frozen in place, but a few quick-thinking bystanders rushed to provide help. A rather burly man stepped in front of a slight woman who was approaching one of the victims. “Please stand back,” the man said in an official-sounding voice. “I’ve been trained in first aid. I’ll handle this.”

“That’s fine,” the woman allowed as she stepped aside. Then she added in a louder voice, “When you get to the part of your training that says, ‘call a physician,’ I’ll be standing right here.”

Haven’t we all had times when we’ve been just a little too confident in ourselves? We’ve claimed expertise when our knowledge has been limited. With our pride at stake, we plunged ahead when caution would have been a better rule. We’ve spoken out when we should have listened. We’ve offered advice rather than asked for help.

A few years ago I was visiting a church member at the hospital. She was critically ill and in the intensive care unit. A man she knew from her work in the community came to her bedside while I was there. He started to adjust her I.V. “What are you doing?” I demanded to know.

“Oh, these things aren’t working fast enough,” he said matter-of-factly. I marched straight to the nurse and told her that a hospital visitor was changing the flow-settings on her patient’s I.V. He was unceremoniously escorted out of the unit.

This man may have been mentally unstable. I do not know. On the other hand, he may have spent a lot of time in hospitals and seen the nurses adjust the I.V. drip countless times and thought, “Hey, that’s easy. I can do it too!” I hope he never visits me when I’m in the hospital.

Of course, there are times when those with all the expertise make mistakes, or when they misjudge their own abilities. An old saying holds that physicians make the worst patients. I’ve seen that with a close friend who stubbornly refused to see a doctor when he had misdiagnosed and was mistreating his own health problem, an unusual illness that caused a lot of damage because it was caught so late.

Perhaps we could coin a term here for what I am trying to describe: expertitis. It’s what happens when we think we know a lot more than we actually know, and lacking humility, fail to listen to those who do.

I’ve noticed it a lot. A troubled couple fails to go for counseling because they figure they already know everything a competent counselor could tell them. An addict will not enter treatment, because he is so certain that he has a grip on his alcohol consumption.

Then, there is money! We are all experts at handling money, aren’t we? We write checks. We pay bills. We have bank accounts, and perhaps even invest our savings. We all know exactly what we are doing when it comes to complex financial decisions. But, if we are all such experts, then why are millions of Americans losing homes they cannot afford to live in and they cannot sell? Why did they completely throw aside prudence when it came to the most important financial decision most of us ever make as we purchase a home? A lot of blame has been cast upon unscrupulous mortgage lenders, and they certainly deserve it. But, an equal amount of

blame surely lies with borrowers who foolishly swam into water that was way over their heads. I'm not even going to try to fathom the mistakes of those who bought these loans. We are all paying for their mistakes and perhaps will be for many years to come.

Personal health. Interpersonal relationships. Business and financial decisions. These are just a few of the areas where we may fool ourselves into thinking that we know a lot more than we actually do. It's true in our religious and spiritual lives. Expertitis afflicts us here, too.

This is the thing that is so striking about Peter's confession and subsequent rebuke. Yes, he knows that Jesus is the Messiah, but when Jesus continues his lesson, seeking to describe to the disciples what this Messiahship actually entails, Peter pulls him aside. "No, Jesus, you've got it wrong. I've got a better idea about what a Messiah does. He doesn't suffer. He doesn't get killed. Those things must never happen to you!"

We argue with Jesus, too. We argue with God. We pretend that the religious life is about *my* gain and relieving *my* pain. And that is true. But it's only half the truth. Because a life with God is not about running away from pain but learning how to bear it, both our own pain and that of others. Likewise, God brings us gain, sometimes in ways that are material or physical and at other times these gains are less tangible, more spiritual. When we try to grasp selfishly onto those gains, they become like dust between our fingers, fleeting and empty, a curse upon us or those around us. But, when we acknowledge them as gift and subject to God's control, they become blessing for all.

Some of our largest spiritual challenges occur when we try to make Jesus look like us, act like us, think like us, rather than conforming our lives to the example of his actions and teachings. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The Apostle Peter has always had a special place in the traditions of the church. Particularly in the Roman church there is a deep reverence towards Peter, precisely because of the praise Jesus lavishes upon him when he correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah. They make a rather literal reading of the words “on this rock I will build my church”; several centuries after the creation of the New Testament, church authorities began to make the explicit assertion that Peter was the leader of the church at Rome and its first Bishop. The Bishops of Rome, that is the Popes, who follow him have, they argue, a penultimate authority over the whole church because of their connection to Peter and hence these words of Christ. On this basis the Popes even claim for themselves the mantle of infallibility.

What an irony that is, because Peter himself is so very fallible. He gets one right answer, but as we read what follows we start to wonder if it was just a lucky guess.

The Christian life is never based on lucky guesses, answers that lack the fullness of meaning, lessons that do not require hard work and change.

Remember how you were graded in a High School math class? If you didn't show your work, you could never get full credit! That's how my math teacher did it. Because in math, as in life, it's easy to short circuit the process, look over a friend's shoulder, come up with a plausible answer but not have any idea what it means.

“Do the work,” Jesus is telling us. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Then, and only then, will we know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And as we tell others, they will see the truth in our lives.

Amen.