

Think about your favorite food. Maybe it's an individual thing like a piece of fruit, or maybe it's the result of a recipe with lots of ingredients. Take a moment to really visualize it; recall the flavors, the textures, the colours, the temperature. When you think of this food, are there other associations that come with it? It's a recipe handed down through the generations. It reminds you of a special place where you had it the first time. Now, how would you describe this favorite food in a way that makes someone else want to try it? Sometimes the best way to convey an idea, or a feeling, or an experience is to describe it rather than define it.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" What is their experience of him that shapes their way of knowing him? In other words, how do you take this new thing and convey it to others so that they'll also want to understand?

Jesus "sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." One of the things that makes people reluctant about Christianity is the part about evangelism. I can't say I've ever come across anyone who likes the idea of approaching strangers on the street to strike up a conversation about Jesus. There's something disquieting about the whole notion. First of all, one must be outgoing enough to want to talk to strangers. Not everyone is an extrovert. Secondly, one ought to be articulate enough in the language of Christianity to be able to discuss Jesus well. Finally, and this is the part that scares people off the most, one must know what to do if the conversation partner asks deeper questions or pushes back. It's one thing to talk about Jesus. It's quite another to keep up with an extended cogent dialog. When Jesus sternly orders his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah, that's enough for people to want me to get to the point of the sermon where I say "and that's the good news!"

But there's more to both Jesus' order, and the context around it. The place where Jesus issues this order should give the disciples pause to consider what proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah means. Matthew describes the group entering "the district of Caesarea Philippi." This is a significant city for Matthew's readers.

In Caesarea Philippi, there is a well-known cave with a spring in it that had served as a sanctuary dedicated to the Greek god, Pan. The Roman historian Josephus noted that there were Greek inscriptions carved into the rock, with dedications to other pagan gods as well. Along with the polytheistic nature of this place, there was also a nod to civic and political religion in the form of a temple built by Herod the Great to honour Caesar Augustus - note the name "Caesarea." By the time Jesus and the disciples visited, Herod's son Philip had acquired the structure to serve as the administrative centre of his government - note the name "Caesarea Philippi." When Matthew includes this location in his account, his readers also understood this place to be where Roman forces went to celebrate after destroying the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. The destruction of the Temple by the Roman forces was a big deal to the Jewish people.

When Jesus asks his disciples to articulate who they think Jesus is, he does so against the backdrop of pantheistic worship, the acknowledgement of the Roman Emperor as the personification of god, and the power and dominance of corrupt earthly rulers. Knowing this, you can see just how loaded this question actually was. Jesus wasn't just asking them to name his identity. He was asking them to recognize him in and amongst the context of the noise of competing forces. Can you perceive the Messiah in the midst of all of this? Will you know him when you see him?

When people today describe Jesus they come up with all sorts of descriptors: lamb of God, good shepherd, light of the world, teacher, healer, and so on. All these descriptors are good. My favourite is, Jesus is love. How do you convey love to others in a way that invites them to understand it for themselves?

An army unit had just returned from an extended deployment overseas. They were welcomed home in the traditional military style. The unit marched into a hangar and lined up perfectly. The commanding officer stood at a podium and addressed the troops and audience about how valuable these soldiers were and how much they were loved. The straining patience of the audience was palpable. Suddenly, all the military formality and precision fell apart completely in one silent moment. While the commanding officer was detailing all the reasons to love these soldiers, the 7 year-old daughter of one managed to escape the bleachers and ran toward the formation. With arms wide and tears streaming, she ran past the podium, toward her father in the front row, into a full-on hug. No amount of rational and formal convincing on the part of the commanding officer could convey love like a 7 year-old's hug running in at full speed.

When Jesus then tells the disciples not to mention anything to others, it's not because he wants to hush the good news. Coming to the conclusion that Jesus is the son of the living God is a recognition all disciples must make on their own, based on their personal relationship with God and their lived experiences. It's an understanding better felt in the heart than the brain. The good news of Jesus Christ is experiential. It's intuitive. It's actually hard to define. Apophatic theology tells us that it's easier to say what God is not, then to say what God is.

Like the disciples in Caesarea Philippi, and Matthew's readers four generations later, we also stand at the intersection of the same kinds of forces: economic, political, religious, cultural, historical, just to name a few. These are all inescapable facets of our lives together in this particular place and time. Each one leverages itself for our attention. We each stand, just as the disciples in Caesarea Philippi, in the midst of it all and are asked to identify Jesus. It seems to me that trying to define Jesus in a logical, articulate way, frequently adds to the competition of all these things. For all his fine words, the commanding officer of that military unit couldn't convey love more articulately than a 7 year old.

Discipleship in our time is not so different from discipleship in Peter's time. It's a way of living the principles of our faith by experiencing the teachings of Jesus Christ. Peter speaks on our behalf too as we come to the same conclusion about who we say Jesus is. When we reflect on our faith journeys and our encounters with Christ, we should recognize that standing in the midst of all the noise that competes for our attention is the object of our faith: Jesus the Messiah, the son of the living God. The comfort and joy of our faith appears as calmness and love in the midst of all the competing forces around us.

Why not take Jesus' command literally? Jesus "sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." With so many competing voices out there, it's hard to get a word in. The best evangelism may be the one that shows what a living faith looks like rather than trying to convince.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we read, "If I speak in the tongues of men, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." Grace quietly allows us to come to our own conclusions about who Jesus is.

God directly demonstrated the power of deep quietness when God passed by Elijah. God was not in the wind that tore apart the mountains, or in the earthquake, or in the fire, but in a gentle whisper.

A popular quote often attributed to St. Francis says, "preach the Gospel. Use words if necessary."

Maybe Jesus was trying to tell us something about evangelism in the Gospel story today. Maybe describing the love of Jesus is more like the sublime flavour of a single, perfect strawberry on a warm June day. Maybe the love of Jesus is a recipe handed down over the generations with the wisdom of our mothers and grandmothers baked in.

We who are able to declare that Jesus is Lord, knowing all the reasons why we believe that, are truly blessed. We can share those blessings best by demonstrating, in tangible and meaningful ways, how our relationship with Jesus brings us that comfort and joy, calmness and love. Actions speak louder than words and more effectively reveal what's really important to us. Anyone can say that community matters, but to actually be part of one takes some commitment. We can add to the noise of competing forces by trying to convince people that Jesus is the Messiah, or we can reveal the grace and peace of faith by how our understanding of Jesus brings stillness and clarity to the noise. Love is the most powerful force in the universe, and yet a 7 year-old can demonstrate it without uttering a single word. Share your faith like you would share your favourite food. Invite someone into the kitchen with you.

Jesus "sternly ordered the disciples *not to tell* anyone that he was the Messiah." And that's the good news.