



Sermon

I know that I confused them, those men and women who chose to follow me in my three year ministry. One day, Simon Peter came to me and said, “People have all kinds of ideas about who you are.” “What are they saying?” I asked. And he said to me, “Well, some think you are John the Baptist, others think that you are the prophet Elijah, and others the prophet Jeremiah.” Truth be told, I found that rather flattering. You see I came from such humble beginnings. My mother was fond of saying that I was born in a barn, if you know what I mean. My father was a carpenter and he taught me how to work with my hands and I assumed that I would follow the course of his life. That’s how things were.

So to be compared to John the Baptist and the prophets, that was something. And I also knew I shouldn’t let it go to my head. I’d already spent 40 days fasting in the desert, tempted by a lot more than this. I knew that no good could come of flirting with that kind of prideful thinking, flattering as it was. I had so much work to do.

You want to know the truth? I really didn’t feel like telling my disciples what they were aching to know. They wanted some firm kind of answer and I wasn’t ready to be put in a box like that. Truth be told, I was still trying to figure it out myself. I also wanted my disciples to make up their own minds, not to follow a crowd or the latest rumor. By the time Simon Peter asked me that question, crowds were following us and I knew how easy it would be for my disciples to get carried away with our growing popularity. They had to be doing this for the right reasons, not to follow any self-satisfying fantasy of greatness. So I put the question right back at Simon Peter. “Who do you say that I am?” And Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

That, too, could have gone to my head so easily, if I allowed the term Messiah to mean that I am some super hero, the only begotten son of God, come in glory and righteousness and all that stuff. Remember what Messiah means in Judaism, the religion that I was raised in and that I stayed faithful to all my life. The Messiah is “an anointed one” and there is no assumption that only one person gets to have that favor. But still, so many people think it means just that, and I still wonder if there’s something I should have said or done to clear up that misunderstanding. We all have regrets, and truth be told, that is one of mine. I console myself by saying that the decisions of others are not my responsibility. I did the best I could. Can you tell this is a sore spot for me? How many people have turned away from my true message because they have been wounded by those trying to put me in a box of their own making?

Anyways, getting back to the point, I did believe I was a Messiah. What else could explain what happened to me? Like I said, I thought my life was pretty much set. I knew who I was going to be and what would be my lot in life. When you grow up in poverty you don’t even ask yourself the questions: What am I meant to be? What are the possibilities for my life? Setting yourself up like that is too dangerous and can leave you painfully dissatisfied with your life. But, in spite of that, something happened. And I really don’t know how to explain it.

You see what’s outside those windows in that garden? Look at it! An explosion of new life! A few weeks ago there was nothing there. Old leaves and dried grass, grey and brown mud. That was me. But then, I heard John the Baptist preaching. He preached a message that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, and he described it so beautifully that I wanted to be part of the ushering in of the Kingdom of Heaven, to be a force for love and justice, and when he called forward those who wished to be baptized, I walked up, and as I stepped into that river, I felt the skies open over me, and I became like that garden. I felt so alive, filled with energy and vision. I was like a swelling bulb, stretching through the cold soil reaching for the sun. And just like that bulb, there was no going back. I was dying to the life I had been living and setting forth for a new life.



You know even as I’m sharing this with you, I still feel like I’m not explaining it right, but maybe some things just aren’t meant to be explained. They’re meant to be experienced. And besides, we have more important things to do when we are in the springtime of our lives.

I began to speak about new life to anyone who would listen. I was surprised at how many did want to listen. John the Baptist had primed the pump and it seemed like people were ready to pull up the bucket and drink from an everlasting well of life. It reminds me of the story of the mustard seed. A farmer scatters his seed in the spring soil. Some of it falls on rocky ground. There is nothing to support it and the seed never even sprouts. Some of it falls in thorns, brambles and weeds. The overgrowth keeps away the sun and steals nutrients from the soil. The seeds never have a chance to mature. But some seeds land in the rich soil and they grow strong and tall, scattering their own seed in the wind many months later. I saw so many people who had been scattered onto rocky and weedy soil. Sometimes they put themselves there through their own choices. Sometimes they had been forced there by an unjust world. John the Baptist had wanted better for them and began to show them not just the path to the good soil, but how to be the good soil so that the seeds of truth and love could take root in them. I wanted them to see and know in the depths of their being that they were each other’s brothers and sisters and that good soil is not simply a factor of chance. Good soil is intentional and prepared by loving hands and hearts and spirits.

We lived in a world that was so divided. Jew against Roman. Roman against Roman. Jew against Jew. The powerful against the weak. The weak divided amongst themselves, fighting each other for crumbs. It seemed like all of life was based on the principle of scarcity, that you had to fight for your piece of the pie and not let go no matter what and no matter who you hurt. And the temples weren’t helping. In order to protect themselves and their power, they became part of this oppressive system. What was the result of all this division? You could cut through the social tension with a knife. It would have been so easy to inflame passions into war, and there were most definitely forces trying to do just that. ... Sound familiar?

I wanted people to see that the good soil wasn’t just for them or for people like them. And the good soil wasn’t something you walled off and protected. In fact, by keeping it just for yourself, there was less for you and everyone else. Why else did I tell the rich man that he had to give away all he had and follow me? You can’t walk into the Kingdom of Heaven burdened with all that weight. Just like a seed that falls into the brambles, you will be cut off from the sun and the riches of the earth will be stolen from you. But, “when you dedicate yourself to the [good soil], springtime is eternal and no wintry hour of life can blight [your] faith or freeze [your heart].” (A. Powell Davies)

You know, some people really got what I was saying. They understood what I meant by the Kingdom of Heaven. But others, not so much. They were happy to hear my message when they could make it mean that they got more of the good soil. But when they approached the truth that they were being asked to give as much if not more back, that’s when people started getting nervous. They got into that old scarcity thinking. The “What about me” thinking.

People who were wealthy, often found me pretty threatening. Still do. People with privilege and a lot of political power, if they really looked at what I said, found me threatening. Still do. Anyone with a stake in the status quo, finds me threatening. You know how I know that? Because they often tone me down and make me only a personal savior. That way they get to make passages like the “Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven” into a metaphor or symbol. I’m way less threatening when salvation is about right belief more than right action.



Still, there was such a hunger for a new way of being, and the more I asked, the more people moved beyond their own limited thinking and believing and responded. By the time that fateful Passover arrived, I couldn't go anywhere without being surrounded by crowds. It was so hard to walk into Jerusalem that my disciples found a donkey for me to ride on so that we could make our way through the throngs of people. And then it's like the sky broke open once again. They danced in the streets, cried out my name, wept with joy. Again, I had no illusions. I knew that some got it and some didn't. Still, this was a wonderful moment and I encouraged my disciples to bask in its warmth because inevitably, when your message of new life gains a foothold, the forces resisting it will grow stronger because their fear is growing.

For a good part of three years, I had kept those forces at bay. It gave me more of a chance to really connect to people. It gave the people time to understand better what I was telling them. But it was really only a matter of time. When you are committed to change and healing, the struggle often doesn't get easier, it actually gets harder. The closer you get to making a difference, the more naysayers there will be, people who say what you want is not possible or even desirable, that what you're saying is heretical, dangerous, immoral. There are all kinds of subtle and not so subtle ways people will try to undo you when you get hit too close to the mark, and they'll even claim the moral high ground as they're taking you down.

On that Thursday, surrounded by crowds, we arrived at the Temple of Jerusalem. And what I saw made me so angry. Our three year ministry was about freedom, liberation from bondage, unconditional love and compassion, generosity. I saw the temple turned into a marketplace, making access to God conditional on your ability to purchase a sacrifice. What an insult! I rushed in, I turned over all the tables and drove everyone out. Oh, you could hear coins clattering on the hard stone floor.

And that's when I knew this was it. Things were going to change very quickly. I was lucky to have one more meal with my dear friends, those people who had gone through thick and thin with me. Oh, that I could protect them from what was to come.

That night, they arrested me, and on the next morning, I stood before those who opposed me.

“Who are you?”

As with Simon Peter, all those years ago, I resisted the impulse for a quick and simple answer.

“Are you the Messiah, tell us.”

I answered, “If I tell you, you will not believe and if I question you, you will not answer.”

“Are you the Son of God?”

I answered, “You say that I am.”

They didn't like that so much. So next I was brought before Pilate.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” he asked.

I answered, “You say so.”

That sealed my fate. I don't like telling this next part of the story. I know there's many who relish in it, every gory detail. There's some who believe my torture and execution had to happen, that it fulfilled some prophecy and was the will of God. I fear the God they believe in for what God would do that to his child? God wasn't working through the hands of the Romans. He wasn't working through the nails that pierced my body. God was working through the women who stayed by me as I went through my last hours. She was working through everyone who



saw what was happening and kept faith. The terrible things that happened, that’s not God. That’s not the Spirit of Life. There are no words for what happened.

You know, I thought, perhaps, being an anointed one, I would be able to stay strong to the end, faithful, trusting, in a place of love. I thought somehow I would not suffer as much. I guess I was still vulnerable to prideful thinking. And I almost made it. I saw the two men on either side of me and I blessed them. But the pain was too much. When you’re in that kind of pain, you are completely at its mercy, and in my brokenness, I crumbled. It was as if the skies closed off from me. It got so dark. I got so angry and so afraid. I just wanted it to end. I cursed God. “Why oh why have you forsaken me? It is finished.”

And in that moment I really believed it was. I felt like the seed scattered in the rocks. I believed that everything I had done was for nothing and that my message would die with my body.

And then, oh mercy.....the pain was gone... And all was silent. So silent.

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I wish I could tell you what happened then. I wish there were words for it.... So again, I ask you to look outside the windows of this beautiful place and see the gardens that seemed dead but a few weeks ago, and are now alive.

When I died, those who followed me were heartbroken. They too feared that all was lost and that all had been for nothing. But for them, the skies slowly opened up. They loved me so much. They loved what they had become with me. They loved the vision they had made their own. And in their love and in their faith and their trust in the goodness of their God, I came back. And I keep coming back. No one seems to want to let me go. Here we are, 2000 years later, and here I am. I never show up quite in the way you expect, but I always show up in the way you need. And for that, I am so blessed there are not enough words to say it.

So you may be asking, “Who are you?”

And I say to you, “Who do you say that I am?”

But it is the next question that is most important: “Given who you say that I am, who are you? Who are you for your brother and sister? Will you be the good soil?”

You know what I wish for you? That the skies would open over you, and that you would become like that garden.

Together, we are the resurrection. We are the risen Christ. We are all anointed ones if we can accept the blessing.

Amen and blessed be!