

24th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B - 2006
“Whoever wishes to come after me ...”

Peter got it right! Jesus was the Christ, that is, the Anointed One, the Messiah. Peter had to feel a little proud of himself, although he was as surprised as anyone to hear those words came out of his mouth. As Matthew’s account of this story says, he hadn’t figured it out by himself. It was the Heavenly Father who had revealed it to Peter. But what did that matter? He had it right. But in response, Jesus gives a most unusual warning: *“Don’t tell anyone!”*

What’s going on here? Why not tell? It’s the news the Jews had been waiting centuries to hear. Peter was ready to put it on the internet. Then Jesus tells him why. *“The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days.”*

It’s like Jesus is saying to Peter, *“Peter, you know that I am the Messiah, but you have no idea what kind of Messiah I am. You think I’m going to be a take-charge, don’t-take-no-for-an-answer, get-it-done-yesterday kind of leader. Well, I’m not. I’m not going to be a conquering hero, either. I’m not going to defeat the Romans by crushing them. If I did that, you would never understand what I am all about. You’d think that God was about domination, killing and destroying enemies. Well, that’s not me. I am about something far more subtle than that. I’m going to suffer, Peter, and die, and rise again, and in that action, I am going to unleash on the world another force, stronger than any army; the Spirit of Love. But before that, you need to see what love looks like. I am going to use the power of love on you and on all people, even my enemies. And if you don’t*

understand what I am doing, you will end up doing more harm than good by claiming to be a follower of mine.”

Poor Peter doesn't understand a word he is hearing. It doesn't compute with his preconceived notions of what a Messiah should be. So he objects, even rebukes Jesus! In effect he says, *“You can't be that kind of Messiah. That isn't what we want and it's not what we need.”* And in response, Jesus rebukes Peter in the strongest way he could. *“Get behind me, Satan.”* If God the Father was speaking through Peter when he professed Jesus as the Messiah, it is evil itself speaking through Peter now. Satan had to stop Jesus from executing his plan of unleashing love upon the world or he would be defeated, it would be all over for him, everywhere.

Jesus is a suffering Messiah. He is committed to love wherever that love takes him, and he knows it is taking him to the cross. It is inevitable. And he says to Peter and to all his would-be followers that they must be willing to take up their crosses and follow him, too. That is, they must choose the way of love, and go wherever it takes them. It is a prerequisite of discipleship. The reason Jesus tells Peter not to reveal him as the Messiah is because it is not the right time. He does not understand. If he can't get the cross, he can't get what being a follower of Jesus means. Only after witnessing Jesus' suffering and death could he begin to understand who Jesus really is. And only then could he begin to understand his mission in the world.

It is only after we commit to carry the crosses that come to us because we are committed to the way of love that we can come to understand what being a Christian is in our world today. That is why, by the way, that the Sacrament of Matrimony is so critical to the Church. They model commitment to the way of love. The husband and wife commit themselves

to the way of love for better and worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and health. In other words, they commit to love each other no matter what. This is why all children deserve to be home-schooled in the ways of love.

Our purpose as Christians is no more to conquer others to make them like us, or get rid of them if they if we can't, than it was Jesus' purpose to conquer the Romans. Our strategy has to be more subtle than that. It is to love those who don't know Jesus as a suffering servant, to show them that there is an alternative, another option for life that they can choose other than the world's way. We have to show them by our lives that there is a better way than violence, hatred, revenge, cruelty, selfishness or domination. And if we are credible, those others will be drawn, not to us, but to the transforming love of God. I think it was G. K. Chesterton who said. *"It's not that Christianity has failed, it's that it has never been tried."*

As we turn to the Eucharist today, we do so sadly aware of the ways we wish Jesus had been more like the Messiah that Peter had hoped for. We still want a conquering hero, someone to fight our enemies for us, to crush them if necessary. We still look for any other way than love to address the problems of life. While there are wars raging in our world, there is also one raging inside of each of us to control own hearts. As we offer ourselves to the Father through Jesus in the Eucharist, let it be an act of surrender to the way of love. You see, we must believe as Christians that love is still the greatest force for good in the world today.