

NO CONFORMITY TO THIS WORLD

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Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8; Isaiah 51:1-6

For two millennia, people have tried to figure out why Jesus did not want his disciples to tell anyone that he was the messiah or the Christ. For 2 millennia, nobody knows for sure. This question, “Why did Jesus want to keep his true identity a secret?” has been so prominent throughout the history of the church that this question has a title of its own known as the messianic secret. Was Jesus afraid that if he divulged his true identity too soon, the people might pressure him all the more to fulfill the visions and expectations of the prophets whereby he would have to liberate Galilee and Judea from the hands of the Romans, establish their own sovereignty as a nation, and develop a new Eden on earth where everyone would experience the justice and righteousness of God in all of its fullness?

Such is the vision that Isaiah portrays in our first lesson for today. After Jerusalem had been captured and destroyed by the Babylonians and many of the prominent people of Judah were deported to Babylon, most of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah concluded that God had forsaken the people of Judah. Those who remained in Judah suffered under the occupation by the Babylonians and longed for the day when they would be free from all foreign domination and control. Isaiah portrays a vision of that day, often known as the day of our God. However, that day never came because Judah was occupied and dominated by one empire after another—first by the Babylonians, then by the Persians and the Greeks, and now by the Romans. For almost 600 years, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah were waiting for a messiah to come in order to deliver them from the hands of their captors and save them from this occupation by foreign powers.

With this kind of expectation and anticipation that has been building up for almost 6 centuries, is it any wonder that Jesus is hesitant to divulge his true identity? If the people are told for a fact that Jesus is the promised messiah, and no longer are left wondering if he is John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or some other prophet, imagine how the people would react. If the people knew for sure that Jesus was the promised messiah, they would go crazy, and they would demand that Jesus immediately form an army to chase the Romans out of their land so that they would be free to govern themselves in the way that the prophets had envisioned.

However, Jesus had a different vision, or, better yet, had a different interpretation of the prophetic vision that would not involve the shedding of any human blood,

except perhaps his own. This vision was embodied in what the Apostle Paul describes today as the body of Christ, the messiah. Those who would choose to become members of this body of Christ were expected to present their own bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, and refrain from being conformed to the ways of this world. According to the ways of this world, the followers of Jesus Christ could justify sacrificing their bodies in battle in order to acquire and maintain the freedom that the people desired. However, Paul suggests that those who have been transformed to the ways of Jesus would devote themselves to living together with such love and respect for one another that this experience of community would be the bodily sacrifice that would culminate in what was good and acceptable and complete according to the will of God.

While under the domination and control by the Romans, the early followers of Jesus attempted to live out this vision of Jesus for which he was willing to give his life. However, too soon thereafter, this image of the body of Christ became institutionalized and became known as the church—a church that eventually adopted so many ways of this world that no one today can sometimes tell the difference between the church and the world. According to the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, this church would be built upon the solid testimony and witness of Peter, the Apostle. However, I would dare to say that Jesus had no intention of starting a new religion and creating the institution of the Christian church as we know it today. As a good Jew, educated in the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus actually set out to reform the Judaism of his day, so that God's chosen people might return to being a light of justice and righteousness among all of the nations of the world as Isaiah had envisioned this nation to be.

However, the religious leaders of Jesus' day would have nothing to do with Jesus' reformation. In fact, they were so threatened by his way of delivering and saving the people that they convinced the Roman authorities to put Jesus to death. Nevertheless, when the followers of Jesus perceived that God had raised Jesus from the dead, they became inspired and motivated to carry on Jesus' mission in the way to which Jesus had given testimony and witness. Therefore, these early followers of Jesus often referred to Jesus as the Light of the world, because they understood that Jesus had come to reveal to the world God's way of love, justice, peace and freedom by which God eventually would deliver and save the whole world from destruction at the hands of humankind.

The Apostle Paul describes today how these followers of Jesus who have embodied the ways of their messiah could become an extension of this light or revelation to the world that eventually could save the world as Jesus had been

commissioned to do. One of the first things that these members of the body of Christ would have to do is refrain from being conformed to the ways of this world. The people of this body of Christ would have to learn how to love and respect one another so that all of their differences would not give them a reason to create dividing walls of hostility among themselves, as so often happens in this world, especially among the nations of the world.

These people of the body of Christ also would experience such a transformation of their hearts and minds that they would be willing to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, as Jesus did, in order to fulfill the vision of salvation that Isaiah portrayed for the whole world. As a part of this transformation, the people of this body of Christ would realize that once Jesus' blood was shed on the cross, no follower of Jesus would have to shed another person's blood in order to fulfill this mission. Rather, these followers of Jesus would understand that their spiritual worship would involve learning how to live with one another in community without creating dividing walls of hostility among themselves, and how to live in this world without the use of force or violence.

Two thousand years later, we still are trying to learn these ways of Jesus so that we will not be conformed to the ways of this world. For this reason, we come to this table often and we share in the body and blood of Jesus, our Christ, because in so doing, we are reminded over and over and over again that we are one body in Christ and that here we can put aside all of our animosities, all of our hostilities, and all of our enmities, and be at peace with one another in a way that only the Spirit of God could accomplish on our behalf by the grace of God.

Think about this holy meal for a moment. At this table, we can have people who are Democrats or Republicans, rich or poor, black or white, heterosexual or homosexual, young or old, Catholic or Protestant, male or female, capitalists or communists, and for one brief moment, all of these labels don't mean a damn thing. For this brief moment, we present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, and then receive the body and blood of Jesus in the hope that when we leave this table, our hearts and our minds will be so transformed by this gift of grace, that we will be able to relate with each other differently and live in this world differently than how we are pressured by the world to live with one another as we tend to justify all of the ways that we oppress others, steal from others, or kill others for the sake of my individual or national security and freedom.

We have been commissioned by God in our baptism for a different mission in this world. Where the world loves to play on our fears about each other, we are taught

by Jesus to concentrate on our love for one another. Where the world pressures us to compete with one another in order to win the prize of prestige and wealth, we are taught by Jesus to cooperate with one another in order to win the prize of peace with one another. Where the world tells us that we can fight and kill in order to secure our freedom and possessions, we are taught by Jesus to lay down our weapons and refuse to shed another person's blood in order to gain our corporate salvation. Where the world indicates that we can lord ourselves over one another, we are taught by Jesus to be servants of one another.

When we come to realize that Jesus is the best, the most acceptable, and the most complete revelation of God's will that ever walked the face of this Earth, hopefully we will want to participate in this holy meal as often as we can, so that we will be able to embody Jesus' way in all that we think, say and do throughout our daily lives. So, come, eat and drink at Jesus' table, and be delivered and saved from your conformity to the ways of this world by being filled with the love of God as embodied and revealed in Jesus, our messiah. In this hope, may the peace of God that goes beyond all of our human understanding, keep our hearts and our minds always faithful unto Jesus, our Christ. Amen.