

“You Keep Using That Word”

Psalm 19:1-7, 14; Mark 8:27-38 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be encouraged to
faithfulness, even in the shadow of the cross. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Vizzini was a man with a plan. Perhaps I need to back up for a moment. I need to express my condolences to those of you not born in the right moment in history to have watched “The Princess Bride” eleven times before you graduated from high school, such that when I say “You keep using that word” you know exactly what I’m talking about. Vizzini was a small-time criminal mastermind, hired by Prince Humperdinck to kidnap his fiancée and frame the neighboring kingdom for it. He had a plan. It was an elaborate, well-thought-out plan, and he had made all the necessary arrangements to carry it out. So as snags and suggested snags in his plan kept developing, Vizzini responded with one word, “Inconceivable!” His plan couldn’t possibly be flawed! The evidence before his eyes was simply unacceptable as reality. This keeps happening, as the Man in Black gets closer and closer to catching up with Vizzini, his hired accomplices, and the princess, until finally, accomplice number two – none other than the acclaimed, if possibly washed-up Spanish swordsman Inigo Montoya – quietly replies, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” It’s a line with staying power, and one that has particular resonance today, as people pretend words mean whatever they want.

“Inconceivable” is probably a good way to sum up Peter’s reaction when Jesus described to the disciples what it meant that he was the Messiah. Peter was clearly excited about being a disciple. He was proud to be following the one, true Messiah and to be “in the know” in a way most other folks weren’t yet. Jesus was no reincarnation of John the Baptist or even the return of Elijah. He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God! Peter was psyched!

It's not clear exactly what sort of expectations or hopes Peter had attached to Jesus being the Messiah. He seems to have had the impression that the plan was somehow still open to feedback about how to proceed. What is obvious is that he was not cool with any of it involving suffering. “Rejection? Death? What? No! You’re telling it wrong!” Jesus’ explanation of Messiah-hood was inconceivable to Peter, so shocking that he had to pull Jesus aside to set him straight.

You know how well that went, obviously. The sharpest words to come out of Jesus’ mouth, aimed not at his persecutors or the temple leaders indulging in hypocrisy, but at his Number One Disciple, Simon Peter, when he couldn’t fathom what lay ahead. Peter kept using the word “Messiah” but it turns out it didn’t mean what he thought it meant. You’d think the heightened drama of this story would make it pretty memorable, but it turns out, this same thing has kept happening over and over, throughout the centuries and all around us today. People keep trying to re-define “Christian” as something other than the sacrificial love Jesus demonstrated it to be.

One egregious example was on the front page of this morning's newspaper. Our local health care facilities are in the midst of trying to enforce their new vaccine mandates. Around 700 health care workers in one system have claimed a "religious exemption" from having to get vaccinated, most of them purportedly as "Christians". The article notes that both the Pope and the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention have declared there is no religious rationale within their traditions for not getting the shot. When the Catholics and the Baptists agree, we should probably pay attention!

Apparently many of these shot-dodgers are trying to quote the verse from First Corinthians about their body being a temple. They seem to think the verse says that their body is their temple rather than what it actually says, which is "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?" The next line in that same verse is "you are not your own." This isn't Christianity; this is self-worship. It's the opposite of following Jesus. If we're going to claim the name of Christ, we don't get to re-define who and what the Messiah is. If we're taking our faith off in the direction of avoiding all inconvenience or sacrifice for the greater good, we don't get to claim we're following Jesus.

There are so many other examples of these attempts at re-definition around us, hashtags have developed to keep track of them. #JesusWept is a succinct one. I'm not sure I've seen #GetBehindMeSatan yet, but it's probably coming soon. We've begun to realize that when the Bible commanded us not to take God's name in vain, it

wasn't so much talking about the words that escape from our mouths when we drop something heavy on our toes. It was talking about the blatant heresy we engage in when we try to pretend that actions that prevent the flourishing of any of God's people are necessary for "religious reasons".

If we're honest, we can admit that we don't have to look outside of ourselves to find this tendency to re-define what following Christ means. The temptation to take the easy way out is always with us. Denying ourselves and taking up crosses is hard. When we avoid the hard conversations, when we hold onto the grudge, when we 'go along to get along' because we hate rejection, when we refuse to make sacrifices for the common good, when we make excuses for not standing with those who are vulnerable or under attack, we're pulling a Peter. I don't think Jesus was telling Peter to get behind him because he didn't want to look at him anymore. The point was that Peter was the follower and Jesus was the leader. When Peter tried to head out front and choose the direction, he got it wrong. He needed to fall back into place, so he could more faithfully follow Jesus. Jesus is the one who knows what "Messiah" truly means. He was the one who had to live out that true definition. Peter just had to follow. We just have to follow, avoiding the temptation to make our own easier way.

If we want to keep using the word "Christian," we need to act like we know what it means. May the grace of God help us follow faithfully. Hallelujah and Amen!