**Words of Power**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the 16th Sunday after the Feast of Pentecost

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

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I’m starting to feel as though I should begin every homily this fall with the words, "This is Chris Wendell, and I approved this message." And it isn’t even October yet. Don’t worry, this sermon is not a political advertisement, but church is probably the only place you can go these days to avoid all those messages.

Whether or not you had a chance to watch much of the political conventions earlier this month, and whether or not you are even following this round of elections closely, its nearly impossible to insulate yourself from the cacophony of political advertisements, messages, talking points, and pundits that compete to get their voices into our ears and into our brains. I can’t remember which Supreme Court justice it was who first said that the solution to bad speech is more speech…and while I agree with that in principle, in practice it just seems to create more noise. The louder and faster and nastier the rhetoric flies, it sure makes it hard to really figure out what issues matter most to me, what candidates actually think about particular issues, and how to sort through the spin and money and influence that colors all the political messaging.

But what’s even harder for me is how the culture of rapid reaction, instant opinion formation, and constantly “breaking news” crawlers across the bottom of televisions, absolutely crowds out space and time for honest reflection about my own personal beliefs. It’s kind of like the well of my mind has been poisoned by the pundits, as if I’ve been drawn into an intense conflict without my consent. And of course, it is easier simply to give in to this mentality than to turn off the radio and claim some space for deep reflection on whether my own political speech truly reflects the values and beliefs in my heart.

When today’s Gospel story comes up in the lectionary, which it does at least once a year, we don’t often think about it as an object lesson in cutting through political speech. But this question of who Jesus really is has significant political dimensions to it. By this point in Mark’s Gospel, word about Jesus has gotten around – and as a result, words about Jesus are also flying around. And the various words about who this strange guy really is, what the nature of his true identity might be, are deeply political in nature. Once Jesus emerged as an organizer and leader, once his power to heal brokenness and his willingness to challenge authority became known, different groups of 1st century Jews began trying to frame Jesus’ identity in one way or another for their own political purposes. I know its shocking, but back then religious people tried to use theological justifications to manipulate groups of people for the purposes of maintaining political control. Imagine that!

Now, Jesus wasn’t running for office; but he was a very political figure within the religious communities of ancient Palestine. Different segments of the Jewish community responded differently to Jesus, based in part, on whether they thought his ministry was threatening to them. Those who advocated strong resistance to the Roman colonization of the Holy Lands sought to frame Jesus within the tradition of John the Baptist, a fierce resister whose conflicts with Herod, the Roman leader, are well documented throughout the Gospels. Those who sought to protect the established religious hierarchy believed Jesus was simply another prophet: an important voice and source of modest authority, but with a previously established role on the margins of the faith community that would be unlikely to result in a major threat to the powers of the day. And there were other groups with other ways of thinking about Jesus as well.

In the passage Mark offers us, Jesus is speaking with his closest followers about this very subject of who he is. But he’s not asking them to rehearse a talking point, to do some sidewalk politicking; rather he’s trying to get at something deeper. Something closer to their hearts, to their core beliefs, rather than their political alliances. That’s why he asks the question twice. First he asks, “What do other people say about who I am?” And then, only after acknowledging the range of responses that were out there in the 1st century equivalent of the blogosphere, does he get to the question he really wants to ask. What about you? What do you think? Not, what do you think about what I think. But what do you think? Really.

The gospel doesn’t record the giant silence that I am sure followed, before Peter ventured to speak, but I’m pretty sure it was there. Now, I love Peter, but Peter hardly had a reputation for deep thoughtfulness, careful reasoning, or logical consistency. He wasn’t the A student ready for the hard question. More likely, given how impulsive he tends to be in other parts of the Gospel, he didn’t even know what the question was going to be -- which, actually, probably made it easier for him to listen carefully, think about it for a minute, be pretty ignorant about the politics of the question, and offer an answer that made sense to him, but wasn’t one of the previously mentioned choices. He actually came up with an original thought. In fact, up to this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has never actually said that he was the Messiah, the Christ. Peter wasn’t reciting a party line -- he came to his understanding of Jesus on his own; and it was true.

And until this week, as I was preparing this sermon, I never really understood why Jesus (in Mark’s Gospel anyway) was so intent on his disciples NOT telling other people what they thought about him. Peter comes up with the right answer, and the first thing out of Jesus’ mouth is, “Don’t tell anyone!” This never made much sense to me. Jesus was trying to build a movement. If Jesus was the Messiah, the predicted liberator of the Hebrew people, why on earth wouldn’t it be a good idea for the people who get this to tell everyone else about it – especially the Hebrew people?

But I think I get it now. I think it has to do with the fact that in order for a statement of belief like, “You are the Messiah,” to really have any power or meaning for a person, it needs to be something that person comes to on their own – as free as possible from the coercive influence of others. Beliefs that are adopted uncritically or for expediency or simply to become part of a group, don’t have a lot of depth and usually don’t have the weight of self-sacrifice behind them. It’s a nuanced thing, because as we all know, a core belief that is nourished by others with similar core beliefs can make those beliefs deeper. This is what the Gospel of Mark is actually really about – a community of friends who share similar core beliefs, and, over time, come to understand just how deeply committed they are to those beliefs, and how willing they are to take risks for them. But beliefs that are held so deeply that they shape core decision making about one’s life and one’s death, only reach that level of commitment if they are made by the individual for him or her self. Jesus wants everyone to make those decisions for themselves; to use faith communities not as places to recite the right answers, but as places to think about what your answers are and what those answers mean.

So, what do you really think about Jesus? Who was that guy? What do you think he did exactly? Why do you think is he so attractive to some and repulsive to others? What do his life and his death mean to you? What do you think?

Maybe that’s a question that’s not so easy to answer for yourself, particularly sitting in a church, where you’re often hearing what other people think or have thought about Jesus. When it seems like there is only one right answer, or at least, only one if you want to be part of this particular group. But getting a right answer isn’t what I think Jesus cares most about. Jesus didn’t really like “right”. He really didn’t like “perfect”. He never made much headway among those who were invested in perfect answers. Jesus loved broken. He loved close, but no cigar. He loved “in the ballpark” or “on the right track.” After all, even though Peter got the “right” answer, in the next breath, he shows that he completely misunderstood the meaning. But Jesus could work with that…because it was Peter’s answer. It made sense to Peter on a very deep level. It was going to shape Peter’s life, because it came from his heart and his body and his mind. He was right, and he was wrong, but most of all his words were his own and he thought for himself. And because he could do that, Jesus made him a leader within the faith community.

For words to really have the power to shape our lives, they must come from within us. They must be our own free discovery. God has put the Divine Word, the Logos, the Christ, into our world for us to discover. The Word does not belong to us, but the process of its discovery does. Others can point us in the right direction and help us refine our understanding, but the Word must be our own for it to take root within us deep enough to transform our lives and nourish us with true blessing. Amen.