

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: February 25, 2024. Year B, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: Mark 8:27-38 (The Lectionary-designated reading starts at v. 31; I'm backing it up to also include Jesus asking, "Who do people say that I am?")

Title: Putting the E in ELCA

Focus: What does it mean to follow Jesus? In this challenging passage, Peter rebukes Jesus and Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter. The conflict stems in part from differing ideas about what it means to be the Messiah. What does Jesus want us to know about him as Messiah and us as his followers? What's the good news we have to share?

### **Confronting a Teacher/Mentor**

Have you ever seen a student talk back to their teacher or a worker publicly question or call out their supervisor or mentor?

- **This happened a couple weeks ago in the Super Bowl.**



*Picture of Travis Kelce, getting in the face of Coach Andy Reid.*

- This is Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce with Coach Andy Reid. Reid had just substituted Kelce out of the game with Kansas City deep in the territory of the San Francisco 49ers. On the next play, the Chiefs fumbled, and the 49ers recovered it. Travis Kelce was frustrated about not being in the game.

We can appreciate that athletes and coaches in the heat of competition get fired up, so we might allow some leeway, but this confrontation was, as Travis Kelce himself later admitted, over the top.

His brother Jason, who is also an NFL player with the Philadelphia Eagles, talked with his brother about it on the podcast the brothers host:

"You crossed the line; I think we can both agree on it."

"I did," Travis Kelce agreed. "I can't get that fired up to that point where I'm bumping Coach."

"I just wanted to let him know that I wanted this thing, and he can put it on me, and I got him. You know, it just came in a moment where we weren't playing very well, I wasn't playing well. . . Sometimes ... emotions get away from me."<sup>1</sup>

Coach Reid spoke with Travis Kelce later. As the player described their conversation:

"Coach Reid actually came right up to me after that and didn't even have harsh words for me. I was ready to get [chewed out] ' and he just let [me] know, 'Hey man, I love your passion.

During the podcast, Travis expressed appreciation for his coach:

"I just love playing for the guy, man. And unfortunately, sometimes, my passion comes out where it looks like it's negativity, but I'm grateful he knows it's all because I want to win this thing with him more than anything" [ESPN article].

## Peter Rebukes Jesus

It's uncomfortable, isn't it, to see a student or an athlete or a young person seem to disregard or disrespect their teacher, coach, mentor, or elder in some way.

That's part of the discomfort of reading this passage from Mark's Gospel. **Peter rebukes Jesus.** There are different ways we could describe their relationship, but Peter the student is directly rebuking Jesus, his teacher.

Here's the sequence of episodes in the story:

- Jesus has asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27).
- Then he asks them directly, "Who do *you* say that I am?" (v. 28).
- Peter answers, "You are the Messiah" (v. 29).
- Jesus continues the conversation by explaining that to be Messiah means that he will undergo great suffering and be rejected and be killed and after 3 days rise again. . . "He said all this quite openly" (v. 31-32).
- That's when Peter began to rebuke him (v. 32).

In recent weeks (last Sunday, Feb. 18 and on Feb. 4 when we talked about the healing of Peter's mother-in-law) we've talked about how Mark and Matthew and Luke are alike and different. Matthew and Luke also tell this story. One of the things that's different about the way that gospel writer Luke tells it is that *he doesn't even mention that Peter rebukes Jesus*. He leaves that part out entirely. It is as though he's so uncomfortable that he intentionally doesn't even tell that part of the story.

It's uncomfortable to see that Peter rebukes Jesus. And it's hard to soften that word **rebuke**. **So why did Peter do what he did? Why did Peter feel the need to rebuke Jesus?**

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<sup>1</sup> Chiefs' Travis Kelce: Bumping, yelling at Andy Reid 'unacceptable.' Posted at ESPN February 14, 2024. [https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/39524733/chiefs-travis-kelce-bumping-yelling-andy-reid-unacceptable](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/39524733/chiefs-travis-kelce-bumping-yelling-andy-reid-unacceptable)

Because of the sequence of the conversation, which is that first Peter acknowledged Jesus as Messiah and then Jesus talked about his coming suffering and death, **we have to conclude that Peter rebuked Jesus because the two of them had entirely different ideas of what it meant to be Messiah.**

Peter doesn't say what his picture of Messiah is, but it has to do with the way that power is used and his expectations of the Messiah being like a conquering hero. They lived in an oppressive political context from which they wanted to be freed. Peter saw the great crowds which followed Jesus. Jesus was at the height of popularity and influence, in terms of how the crowds followed him and responded to him. With this swell of support, Peter didn't want Jesus to waste this opportunity, which he figured he would if he were to suffer and die.

Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter—perhaps even more strongly, saying he is the Adversary or like Satan (v. 33) and is setting his mind on human things rather than understanding God's way of working. Jesus is trying to tell him that the way of the cross—which includes suffering and death—is God's plan.

### **Jesus Wants all of His Followers to Understand (Him as Messiah and the call of followers to follow in the same way)**

Notice that there is a shift in the conversation—or who is directly involved in the conversation: Jesus and Peter have been talking by themselves, because Peter previously “took Jesus aside” (v. 32 b), but when Jesus responded to Peter, he/Jesus turned to look at the disciples (v. 33), which signals that he is drawing them into the conversation. Jesus continues this even more dramatically as he called to the crowd along with the disciples (v. 34) to explain what it means to be his follower.

- <sup>34</sup>He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

**Peter doesn't get what it means to be Messiah.** Jesus tells him he is not understanding God's way of doing things. The way that Jesus turns to the other disciples—who likely are as slow to understand as Peter—and then directly addresses the whole crowd as well, shows how important it is to Jesus that he explain.

- He's first explaining what it means to be Messiah.
- And also calling those who follow him to be oriented in that same way.

### **What is that way, that way of Jesus as Messiah and the way of his followers?**

- Jesus' repeated message and his repeated example is about service, sacrifice, and humility.
- His message and his example are about self-giving love.

- It is not about using power for personal gain or to harm others. It's not about seeking status or position.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus describes his role as being willing to suffer and die and then be raised. He describes the role of his followers as those who are willing to take up their cross and follow him. In a bit, I will say more about following Jesus with the good news we have to share.

## Conflict Due to Differing Understandings of *Messiah*

We are uncomfortable with seeing Peter rebuke Jesus, the student rebuking the teacher. That tension results from the two of them having entirely different understandings of what it meant to be Messiah. **There is another term in this story which in our time and culture similarly provokes tension or conflict because of differing ideas of what that term means.**

Jesus talked about devoting oneself for the sake of the *gospel* (v. 34). The Greek word translated to *gospel* here is *euaggelion* (yoo-ang-ghel'-ee-on). It may be translated as *good news* or more particularly as *the good news of the coming of the Messiah*.

But it's also the word from which we get *evangelical*, and that's the word that provokes tension or conflict because of differing ideas of what that word means.

- As derived from this Greek word, *euaggelion* (yoo-ang-ghel'-ee-on), *evangelical* most plainly or directly means *good news* or can refer to someone who is *eager to share the good news*.

But the tension or conflict with that word comes because in our culture it has come to connote something very different than *good news*.

Whatever a word may mean in an etymological sense or however it may be defined in a dictionary, words are further defined within a cultural context. Words develop connotations within contexts that may shift over time as words are used in particular ways.

What does *evangelical* mean in our current cultural context? Based on what I just said, it depends on who you ask.

Jonathan Merritt, an author who often writes about faith and culture answers in this way in an article in *The Atlantic*:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Recall, for instance, how James and John wanted to be acknowledged as the greatest? It's a story that's told with some variation in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus responded, <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' Mark 10:35-45, Matthew 20:20-28, Luke 22:24-27.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Merritt, "Defining *Evangelical*: Its meaning has shifted throughout Christianity's long history and changes depending on who you ask. Why?" Posted December 7, 2015 in *The Atlantic*.

- To the pollster, it is a sociological term.
- To the pastor, it is a denominational or doctrinal term.
- And to the politician, it is a synonym for a white Christian Republican.

The term has come to mean a particular kind of Christian or a particular segment of the Christian Church, with an emphasis on **conservative evangelical**. This connotation or meaning took shape more distinctly after Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, when the evangelical Christian right's forays into public policy took root and they emerged as a formidable political movement as much as a religious one.<sup>4</sup>

Because of this association, for many people the term *evangelical*, ironically, does not mean **good news** at all. To many, including many Lutherans in America, it sounds like **bad news** because of its association with many things they find to be negative: "legalistic theology; a literal interpretation of Scripture; dismissal of opposing viewpoints; perceived hostility toward the LGBTQ community; skepticism of science and academia; and understandings of such issues as masculinity, femininity, family and marriage that many find oppressive" (Bleazard article in *Living Lutheran*.)

## Putting the E in ELCA

Here's another thing that's interesting and possibly confusing about names: Martin Luther didn't want a church body to bear his name. He would have preferred that people just use the term "Christian," but that was too generic to distinguish the new movement from other types of Christians.

The term "Evangelical" appealed to him because the *good news* which that word means in its truest form connects to Luther's key theological insight:

"... that the 'good news' of Jesus is that we are loved by God and saved by God's grace through faith, not by the good things we do—This idea challenged centuries of Roman Catholic teaching that people had to earn their salvation by being good enough in God's eyes" (Bleazard article in *Living Lutheran*.)

Elizabeth Eaton, the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, is one who urges us to strive to recover the original meaning of *evangelical* as *eager to share the good news*. In calling for Lutherans to reclaim the word, she also adds important qualifier: "We also need to reclaim an evangelical spirit" (Bleazard article in *Living Lutheran*).

**So, how do we put the E in ELCA or the good news in evangelical? How are we doing this—How are we eager to share good news?**

1. **At this week's "Get to Know Good Shepherd," AKA "New Member Orientation," we talked about Good Shepherd's Welcome Statement:** Different

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/evangelical-christian/418236/>

<sup>4</sup> For more information about this, see Robert C. Bleazard, "The 'E' Word: Why does the ELCA have the word 'Evangelical' in its name?" Posted April 6, 2018 at *Living Lutheran*.  
<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2018/04/the-e-word/>

direct, clear, specific, statements of who we seek to welcome and then the closing affirmation: “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here. This is a place where lives are made new. Come and see!”

- “That’s why I’m here/we’re here,” said Larry. (Who, with his wife Becky, by the way, has not grown up Lutheran or been a member of a Lutheran Church before. I say that to be clear that they did not come to LCGS first among the churches they visited. Nor did they come here or choose to join here as an automatic or rote response. They discovered something distinctive and authentic in our welcome.
  - Another newcomer echoed this when he talked about the *specificity* of the Welcome Statement. I think this was his way of emphasizing that people learn more by what they observe and experience through other people’s behavior rather than by what they say. A vague promise does not mean as much as a thoughtfully prepared statement which is lived out in one’s behavior. If we say specifically what we mean or who we seek to include, then we’re also more ready to hold ourselves accountable to that and back it up with our behavior. So, I hear the value for *authenticity* in his comment as well. Incidentally, this comment was made by someone who also didn’t grow up Lutheran. He even told us he is a newer Christian.
2. **“What’s Your Favorite Part of Worship?”** This question was printed on a “Table Talk Card” which someone at our table drew from a pile. Each of us mentioned something that impacts us. I talked about a particular worshipper who sits near another week after week. He very kindly cares for her, walks with her to the Welcome Space after worship by pushing her wheelchair, then waits with her until her ride comes to pick her up.

**Distinctive acts of caring that are fostered from relationships developed in worship are something which touches me.** (And this didn’t have anything to do with me or with formal worship leaders—it happened because caring people made an effort.)

3. **We all have good news stories to tell:** Like responding to the Table Talk card, we all can describe the impact that something has on us.

## **We Are Followers of Jesus with Good News to Share**

Football player Travis Kelce seems to me to be a good guy. He doesn’t want to show up his coach, for whom he has true appreciation. Peter, like Travis Kelce, was not a guy who was shy about speaking up. I think his idea of what it meant to be Messiah didn’t allow him to see suffering and death as anything but defeat.

In our North American culture, this term *evangelical* has come to mean something much different than the good news it was intended to convey.

Jesus calls us to be followers who are eager to share some good news stories that we are loved by God and welcomed by God’s remarkable grace. In the community which we help create, we seek to draw people in that they too, may know this God of grace.