

After Mass last week, Linda Knutsen asked a brilliant question about the Gospel. The passage from Mark last week told two stories about healing—one public and one private. Linda wondered why Jesus told the people who witnessed the private healing not to say anything about it. She's not alone in wondering about this. In fact, Mark's Jesus seems to tell people not to talk about his miracles so regularly that some scholars call the phenomenon Mark's "messianic secret." Theologians have been pondering the question for generations and they have come up with all kinds of speculations to explain this idiosyncrasy.

There are some tantalizing clues in this morning's Gospel that help explain why I think Jesus asks people not to talk about his miracles.

Let me set the scene: Jesus has left the house of Jairus, where he told the witnesses not to talk about the healing of the little girl. Back in his hometown now, Jesus' teaching has scandalized the people. I don't think these folks were ignorant or dull-witted. Jesus has clearly touched a nerve, some underlying concern, and they can only respond by questioning his authority and voicing their annoyance. But people only complain or grouse about things that they care about. These people clearly have a passion about this carpenter, this son of Mary, and his teaching has challenged something that they are committed to in a way that they can't quite dismiss or argue with or even really articulate other than by complaining.

Jesus does not try to appease or accommodate them, but moves on, calling the twelve together and sending them out after giving them authority over unclean spirits. He also gave them a rather offbeat instruction: "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." Publically shaking the dust off your feet would have been understood as a great insult, but asking his disciples to respond to rejection with further rejection seems contrary to how Jesus typically operates. Odd.

But then this reading is filled with oddities. And it's those oddities that offer clues about what Jesus is up to. First clue: Jesus, Mark tells us, was not able to do any deeds of power. You know, just laying his hands on a few sick people and curing them—exactly the same actions that amazed people last week. Other than *that*, though, no deeds of power. Odd.

Another clue: Jesus was teaching in a hometown synagogue. He was talking to a group of devout Jews who were in the habit of shaking dust off their feet when returning home from a foreign place, much like the exiled Jews did when they left Babylon to return home. Also, these people were likely to have been Pharisees, the branch of Judaism that Jesus was raised in. The Pharisees were mostly working-class Jews who stuck to the codes developed after the destruction of the Temple. They also believed in a messiah who would herald an era of world peace, but a messiah in the form of a political figure—a king, like David, who would overthrow the Romans and return the people to the land of their ancestors. That's important to know.

And then there's this: Jesus gave his disciples authority over unclean spirits, which they then put to work in the world. They went out and performed the very deeds of power that Jesus performed.

So it seems in Mark's Gospel, that we, the readers, along with a handful of demons and one woman with a hemorrhage are the only ones who know that Jesus is the Son of God. From the first chapter, Mark's Jesus has been consistently “proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’.”

So why does Jesus tell people not to talk about his deeds of power? What is the “messianic secret”?

First, let me give you an image: Imagine a crystal bowl filled with water and radiating bright sunlight. Now imagine that this beautiful bowl is completely aware of the sunlight streaming through it. Picture it looking out at a sea of other beautiful crystal bowls of all different shapes and sizes, all of them shining with that same sunlight. The bowl is completely

aware that it is not the sunlight and also that it is united with the sunlight. Not one thing *and* not two things.

You see, for six chapters Mark's Jesus has been teaching with his words and his actions what it means to be radiant with God's light. His teachings are still hard for some people to accept, especially those who have convinced themselves that God is distant and that the reign of God is an event yet to come.

Jesus did not want to be confused with the political messiah that many were expecting. These are the people for whom "deeds of power" meant conquering Rome by force, not miraculous healings. No wonder Jesus was amazed at their unbelief.

Jesus was intent on proclaiming the reign of God, but he knew that some people would be distracted by what they saw him do. He told people to keep silent because his truly messianic work had less to do with miracles, healings and exorcisms for *some* people, and more to do with his death and resurrection for *all* people.

For Jesus to be a messiah for all people, he had to transcend the boundaries of tribal, nationalistic or racial groupings, or any other human categories, for that matter. The family of God is for all people, which makes me wonder about Jesus' advice to his disciples: Rather than a symbolic insult or rejection of people, did Jesus intend the shaking the dust off their feet to be a signal that they were returning home from a foreign place? That is to say, did he mean for it to remind them that their actual home was the reign of God already at hand? Or maybe Jesus was aware that, simply by their presence, the disciples would plant something, perhaps as small as a mustard seed, that God would tend in the hearts of those who refused to hear the disciples.

Jesus, the carpenter son of Mary, irritated people in the synagogue and then went on to other villages. Perhaps shaking the dust off was meant as the closing act of doing what there was for the disciples to do and then releasing the outcomes into God's hands. God does seem to work our little irritations like grit in an oyster to produce pearls.

So maybe the messianic secret is not so much a *secret* as it is a slight refocusing. Maybe, as people move toward the light that they notice in Jesus, these moments deflect us toward the source of the light. Perhaps those odd “don’t tell anyone” instructions are not intended to keep secrets, but are there to readjust our attention. The reign of God is at hand, here, present, and we have been invited to *participate* in it, not simply observe it.

If we are distracted by the miracles that Jesus *performed*, we can easily lose sight of the message that Jesus *embodied*. The same message that we, too, have been authorized to embody and carry out to the world.

Like the disciples, we and all followers are invited and drawn to be like Jesus by participating in the reign of God at hand. We are right to marvel at Jesus the Risen Christ, and perhaps the greatest tribute we can offer is to join in the light that radiates from Christ. Alone, we are inadequate to the task, but the Christ within us, among us and around us is more than adequate.

Each of us radiates the light of Christ. That light is not us, but is the Christ in us. We are unified with Christ, though not the equivalent of Christ. The light that radiates from us is only partially about us and is not for us alone, but is for all people and that can feel like a certain kind of responsibility. Every light bulb needs a filament; every candle needs a wick. Without them, without you and I, the light is not made visible. We have a role to play, but we are not the light.

Ours is not to make people be different than they are, but to show up so that God can help them recognize that they, too, are radiant with God’s love, even if it is just a flicker for now. Ours is to be the kindness, the hope, the generosity, the forgiveness, the hospitality, the mercy and justice in the world that people would not otherwise encounter—to *be* light in a dark world whether people can make sense of it or not.

Come to this table, then, and have your light rekindled. And then go out to be evidence that God’s reign is at hand.