

Yr. C, Proper 7
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Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
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Lessons:
Psalm 63:1-8
Zechariah 12:8-10, 13:1
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 9:18-24

Who do you say that I am? I speak to you in the name of the one in whose identity we discover our own: Jesus, the Christ of God.

We can toss around words like Messiah or Christ so easily that I suspect it would take the breath away from the earliest disciples who struggled so faithfully to come to terms with such a radical idea—such a radical *person*.

The crowds that gathered around Jesus offered all sorts of speculation about his identity. Yet, while Jesus was compassionate with religious crowds; he wasn't particularly interested in what they thought about him. So he asked his closest followers, "Who do you say that I am?"

Why should it be any different now? I believe Jesus is still not terribly interested in easy labels that get tossed around by the crowds. No—Jesus is interested in who disciples like you and I say that he is—and not just with our lips, but in our lives.

How do we speak meaningfully about who Jesus is with our lips and in our lives? We have become so subsidized by familiar words like Messiah and Christ that we have even begun to lose our grip on what they mean, generally, much less what they mean personally.

So let's begin with Peter's confession: "You are the Messiah of God." Messiah is a Hebrew word that means "anointed." And while we are at it, you need to know that "Christ" is simply the Greek word for the very same thing, "anointed."

What is the significance of anointing? Well, Israel anointed its kings. It was the sign of their authority to act on behalf of the Jewish nation. Samuel anointed the head of Saul as the first King of Israel.¹ Saul was later rejected as king, and Samuel snuck off to Bethlehem and anointed the head of David—the youngest and therefore least likely of the sons of Jesse—to be Israel's new King.²

After King David was anointed, Israel prospered and grew for a time, and then experienced several hundred years of decline, capped off by the disgraceful and painful act of the citizens being exiled into Babylon as slaves of that kingdom.

In today's Old Testament lesson, the prophet, Zechariah, is writing to the Jews who have returned home after exile and are in the process of restoring life in their homeland and looking toward a better future. Listen again to the words of the Lord according to the prophet: "The House of David shall be like God, like the angel of the Lord, at their head...And I will pour out a spirit of compassion on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem."³

Do you hear how much that sounds like anointing language? And yet, this anointing is not about victory and supremacy, but about protection and compassion—i.e., suffering with. God's anointing is all about

¹ 1 Samuel 10

² 1 Samuel 15-16

³ Zechariah 12:8, 10

protecting the vulnerable, restoring the broken and cleaning up the mess we have made. It is not difficult to see how the Church would later read these words from Zechariah as a reference to Jesus, the one who was pierced. And certainly the anointing of Jesus as the Messiah of God was all about protecting the vulnerable, restoring the broken, and cleaning up the mess all around through acts of grace, mercy, and sacrificial love.

We still anoint like this! At every baptism we welcome new persons into the household of God, we pour out the compassion of God and then we anoint each person as a new king or queen of divine royalty as we say to them, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

We do two things in baptism: we proclaim Peter’s confession about Jesus, “You are *the* Messiah, or Christ, of God.” And then—even more radically—we look into the eyes of the baptized as we anoint *them* with holy oil, saying *you* are *also* anointed by God, “marked as Christ’s own for ever.”⁴

Now that we have examined a little more closely what the labels of “Messiah” and “Christ” mean—for us as well as for Jesus—let’s return to our main question: how do we speak meaningfully about who Jesus is, both with our lips and in our lives?

We find the answer to this question in today’s second lesson, taken from the letter of Paul to the Galatians. Paul was addressing a community of “law and order” types. The Church in Galatia had apparently been led by some preachers to believe that the rule of law was fundamental to how they must speak and live faithfully as followers of this Messiah named Jesus. After all, the Law came from God first, and Jesus himself said that he did not come to abolish the Law. We should not belittle the Galatians for their views, because much of the time we think and act a lot like they did.

But listen to what Paul essentially says. Paul explains that rather than looking at the *Law* as fundamental to how we speak and live faithfully as followers of Christ, we should *instead* look to *Christ* as fundamental to the way we speak and live faithfully as people who also have the gift of the Law as our guide.

You see, Jesus is much more than our guide. Jesus is the essence of our very identity as persons baptized *and anointed* by God to be the Body of Christ in the world today. To use Paul’s words, we have “clothed ourselves with Christ”: our nationality, gender, and job status don’t define who we are—our anointing by God is what distinguishes us and gives us our identity.

In many respects, the Law separated the Jew from the non-Jew, or Gentile. This was not a bad thing, but a necessary thing. You see, the Law was part of how the Jewish people preserved a disciplined identity across the generations as God’s covenant partners. The Jews were called to the special task of enlightening the Gentiles about how a relationship works with the one, true God.

Paul was born into this understanding and pursued it with remarkable zeal until it hit him—that Jesus was the Messiah described by the prophets; he was a compassionate savior, one who suffers with; he came to live in the midst of us in order to restore in a hands-on way that which was broken; and then in the decisive acts of crucifixion, death and resurrection, he cleaned up the mess of things; and not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. Paul saw *Jesus* as the personification of Israel’s vocation to be a light to enlighten the Gentiles—in other words, to show the whole world how a relationship works with the one, true God.

⁴ Book of Common Prayer, p. 308.

Make no mistake about it—this is a radical idea! And if Jesus were *only* our guide it would undoubtedly shake us up from time to time as we sat and thought about it. But remember, Jesus is *not* our guide—he is the essence of our *identity*! Therefore, we are not talking about a radical idea, we are talking about a *radical life*!

We are talking about abandoning all the distinctions that are easily observed according to the law—distinctions of nationality, employment pedigree, and gender—and searching for our unity in Christ Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of an anointed faith that is compassionate, that restores what is broken, and cleanses what is impure. There are many ways in which we are called to live according to the identity we have been given in Christ Jesus. I will offer one particular challenge which is clear from today’s lessons and also timely in our public conversation.

According to the Law, you and I—Gentile Christians—were illegal immigrants into this ancient sect of Judaism that coalesced around Jesus of Nazareth and proclaimed him the Messiah of God. The Galatians correctly recognized this fact and sought to keep the integrity of the Law in place. But Paul—who had an impeccable law-keeping pedigree and practice—also had no doubt that this new Messiah trumped everything, including the Law as the sacred and traditional centerpiece of his faith!

Paul came down on the side of grace. And so, you and I—Gentile Christians—were given amnesty. I am not speaking metaphorically. I am speaking *literally* about the political reality of the early Church in Galatia and in other places. I am also speaking about the *theological reality* of what it means to be given the remarkable privilege of clothing ourselves in Christ Jesus. You see, Christianity is a faith rooted in amnesty, and you and I are the direct beneficiaries of this grace. As Archbishop Rowan Williams wrote recently in an article for *The Christian Century*, “we are in the church because we have been invited, not because we have earned our place.”⁵

We can—and will—have different opinions about the various complexities of what immigration law should look like for our nation. However, we cannot in any way refer to “amnesty” in this present national debate as if it were a dirty word.

- Amnesty is the privilege *every* Christian enjoys by receiving a free pass on the impossible task seeking justification according to the Law. Our justification comes only by grace.
- Amnesty is the essence of how our God operates, like the prodigal father who runs out to greet his totally unworthy son and welcome him back into the household with a grand banquet.
- Amnesty is what Paul demanded from the Galatians who couldn’t quite let go of the distinctions of their traditional faith.
- Amnesty is what Christ gave to his most violent persecutors, even as he hung on the cross and offered forgiveness to them.
- Amnesty is what several Episcopal and other churches have already pledged to offer immigrants in the form of sanctuary from criminal prosecution and deportation.

Sisters and brothers—since Jesus is not only our guide, but the essence of our very identity as the Body of Christ in the world today, amnesty is the very heart of what it means to “clothe ourselves” in Christ Jesus. For there is no longer Jew or Gentile, colonial dame or illegal immigrant, there is no longer free or slave, chief executive or sub-minimum wage tomato-picker, there is no longer male and female, George Washington and Maria Gomez; for *all of you* are *one* in Christ Jesus.

Beloved, we are anointed by the Holy Spirit of God in baptism and marked as Christ’s own for ever. And the question remains: how will *we* speak meaningfully about who Jesus is—with our lips and in our lives?

⁵ Rowan Williams, “In God’s Company”, *The Christian Century*, June 12, 2007.