



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## The Universal Language

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 21, 2013*

*The Fourth Sunday of Easter*

*Based on John 10:22-30*

Have you ever thought twice about calling yourself a Christian? Have you ever reconsidered wearing a piece of jewelry with a cross on it, mindful of how it might be perceived? When reviewing weekend activities with colleagues, have you ever found yourself being careful not to mention that you went to church, even if it might have been a true highlight? I don't know why, but lately I've been hearing a number of stories along this line. Stories of members who are all too aware of that slight but significant recoil that often occurs when it is discovered beyond these walls that one is Christian, or that one goes to church. And there is a clear sense that, sometimes, in the revelation, you have lost some measure of esteem, perhaps a significant measure. But you can't really argue with a withering look. You know how complicated it is. How tarnished the word "Christian" has become in our culture. How "Christian" has come to mean judgmental, prejudicial, regressive, hypocritical, and sheltered. And there is a crushingly long list of definitive examples where this has been the case. But then again, there is the faith you have known, diminished unfairly by association. Yet it would be inappropriate, really, to protest, "But I'm one of the nice Christians, honest!"

As one who wears his Christianity on his sleeve, or perhaps I should say his collar, and who has a career embedded in the church, these sorts of encounters happen less to me. But, many of you have remarked at how draining it can be to be so misunderstood, to be identified with this word that has a ruined and tarnished reputation, and how refreshing it is to come here and not have to worry about those dynamics. Here, in the midst of our worshipping community, the word "Christian" is rarely, if ever, used. Is it even necessary here? The label "Christian" doesn't seem to make it much further than the bookstore. Ideally, in here, all kinds of useful-in-a-pinch, but essentially unhelpful and untrue shorthand fall away. We move through the rhythm of the liturgy. We offer our prayers and songs. We receive blessings and gifts. All in God's light. As we are. Not as people say we are. And in it we hope to find solace and courage and healing. And on the way out, we pick up that label again, stick them back on to ourselves, whether hidden or unhidden, because we haven't found any better word really. This will have to do.

Or does it? If you are uncomfortable calling yourself a Christian, know that Jesus, himself, avoided calling himself Christ!

We discover this in our gospel reading for the day, that even Jesus is uncomfortable with this label that people are trying to give him. A label, in our day, which seems perfectly appropriate. Yet, in his time, it was a liability, and perhaps misleading, given the common understanding of it. It was winter, during Hanukkah, and the people in the temple were getting frustrated with Jesus because he was teaching and ministering but being too vague for their tastes. "C'mon," his opponents say to him as they circle around him. "Be more specific. Are you the Messiah or not?" Or in other words, "Are you the Christ? Tell us plainly." But just as the term "Christian" is loaded in our time, the term "Christ" was loaded back then. Popular imagination saw the Christ, or the Messiah, as the one who would free them from their Roman oppressors by force, not through love and weakness. They saw the Christ as one who would adore the Temple, not criticize it. They thought the Christ would lead a revolution, not a resurrection.

On top of that, the word "Christ" could be seen as a treasonous to the empire. It could be seen as blasphemous to the temple priests. And it would associate him with the great lineage of failed Messiahs who had come and gone. The term was not only misleading, but it was deadly.

The closest he came to using this term was by asking his disciple, Peter, "What are people saying about me?" Peter says, "They say you are the Christ, the Messiah." Then Jesus agrees. But, this

is a roundabout way of claiming who he is. And it is in private. There is such reluctance. Why say who you are, when you can be who you are, unfettered by all the labels that only get you so far? Jesus even avoided calling himself “good.” A man comes to Jesus and calls him “Good teacher.” But Jesus says “Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God.” Can you imagine? A word so seemingly straightforward as “good” is distracting as well. Why call yourself “good” when you can just *be* good, unfettered by the twisted vision of goodness that has claimed so many people? The word “good” is not all it’s cracked up to be, because a lot of very good people, the brightest and best, are going to succeed in crucifying Jesus, all believing that they are doing a “good” thing in protecting God or protecting society.

Language is twisted and co-opted. And so we see a fair amount of Jesus’ ministry is spent evading the people who try to trap him with their language and then making room for his behavior to speak for itself. And this is the way he responds to the people who were trying to pin him down with the word “Christ”: “The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me. I know my sheep and my sheep follow me. I lay my life down for the sheep, leading them to a way of life that is eternal, that nothing, not even death, can take away from them. If I don’t do the works of my Father, don’t believe me. But if I do them, and you don’t believe me, believe the works so that you can know and recognize that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

He doesn’t care what people call him. He just cares that people see the value of God working in the world, working through him, spreading through others, works that are valuable in and of themselves, no matter who is doing them.

So does this mean, you might ask, that I shouldn’t call myself Christian? No. I’m merely pointing out that more often than not, so much of the excellent, beautiful, and rich language that we use in community here—language that allows God to perform delicate heart surgery on those for whom it is crafted—this language is unhelpful and perhaps detrimental beyond our community. And that we should seriously consider our Lord and friend, Jesus, who named himself so much less than being himself. He even said, “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” There is a tangible value to a kind of modesty in matters of faith where, for example in our case, our Christian label and identity, our prayers and our liturgies, are together a kind of undergarment that girds us for our more public and visible life. A necessary garment, but a private one. Everyone needs underwear, but it can be quite distracting if it is in view.

We have to find less parochial and more universal language with which to live out our lives beyond these walls. And do you know what the most universal language is? Action. Doing. Being. Less talk, more walk. This most universal of languages doesn’t need the tongue at all. It looks more like silence than anything else. Or perhaps more like sign language. It’s a language that involves blessing all we meet, even the despised, forgiving those who have hurt us, embracing those who were cast out, grieving and supporting those in crisis, being present among the poor, sick, and imprisoned, where we are beacons of courage and hope the face of explosive rage and despair, where we run into the storms of this world, rather than away from them. Where all this is a kind of sign language, not just using hands, but our entire bodies and souls, a language of biography that speaks for itself in a world where calling it “Christian” would diminish it. For these actions, these signs, are so much bigger and deeper than that word.

They say things are easier said than done. And they’re right, but it goes deeper than that. Because some things in this life, whether being Christ, Christian, or even just being good, some things are harder done than when they are said.

So in our time, a time of abundant blessings but also of disturbing events, may we be given the wisdom to use our words in our world with modesty and care, and to speak ever more fluently in the universal language our bodies speak when Christ is alive again in us, a language that is so universal you don’t even have to be Christian to pick it up.

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