

Some years ago, I found myself standing in the laundry room of my home at the time with the air-conditioning repairman as he pointed to ice encrusting the working parts of my air-conditioner in July. Warm air was blowing out of the vents. He began a small lecture about the finer points of how air-conditioner compressors work and went on for a while. I would have had a better chance of understanding ancient Greek than I did following what he was telling me so, finally when he paused, I interjected, “tell me plainly.”

“This is going to cost you.”

I never like hearing that.

A few months ago on a Sunday morning as I got in the car to come to church a warning light went off on my dash informing me I had a flat tire. I got out and looked at my tires. They were fine. I checked the air pressure, still fine.

The next morning as I sat across from my trusted service advisor he looked at me and said, “Don’t worry, it’s nothing we can’t easily fix. One of your wheel sensors has gone bad. The batteries die and they do that in time. It’ll be about \$500 dollars to fix it.”

“There are four wheels,” I said out loud.

“Yes,” he replied, “And we need to talk about your brakes and you should probably watch a few other things.”

“Tell me plainly.”

“This is going to cost you.”

I never like hearing that.

There's a certain amount of peevishness that seems to surround the question that is asked of Jesus at the moment we read about today in John's Gospel.

Jesus has been walking around freely in the temple, in an area called Solomon's portico and a group of Jews have come to him and asked him to tell them plainly if he is the messiah.

Let's just pause for a moment to clarify one thing. The Christian church has a long and most shameful history of allowing stories such as this one to contribute to anti-Semitism because "the Jews" are presented as a cohesive entity in this story. When we encounter terminology such as this in the Bible, we have to remember that Jesus was a Jew, living in a Jewish culture, and in this story, standing in the Jewish place of worship. Of course the folks who come to ask him a question are Jews!

But there seems to be a certain peevishness for this particular group of folks who have come to Jesus to ask him about his identity.

"Tell us plainly," they say.

In my experience, so often that is the way we say things when we don't want to face up to what they really mean.

Standing in front of my air-conditioner with ice over all the works, I knew not to expect a good outcome. Sitting in the car dealer doing the math of what I had been told, I just wasn't want to draw the sum.

Give it to me straight. Tell me plainly what I'm not ready to hear.

Sitting at the feet of Jesus, hearing him talking, knowing the stories that surround him, knowing the ways in which Jesus has already called his followers to be ready to follow

him, is it any wonder that the people around him want a little extra time to think about it, a little extra clarity – or perhaps to hear that it isn't what they think it is?

Depending on who is doing the asking, there may be a very great deal at stake as to whether Jesus is the messiah.

Jesus pattern thus far isn't one of quiet ethical teaching. His pattern of behavior is not one that upholds the status quo.

In the pages leading up to this encounter we know well he has already stepped on some very sensitive toes.

Sure, he has fed five thousand people and walked across the water but he has also hung out with the likes of a Samaritan and suggested that when the messiah comes all of God's people will worship together and the precious temple in Jerusalem won't be so precious anymore. Samaritans and Jews didn't worship together. They didn't do anything together. It was a "back of the bus" sort of arrangement. That's all going to change, says Jesus.

Sure, he's healed a great number of people, dramatic moments restoring sight to the blind, but he's also done such things on the Sabbath, blowing all the traditions to smithereens and questioning the very basis of how the intersection of faith and practice is understood. The way it has been is not the way it will be if he's the messiah. The Pharisees begin an internal investigation into that particular healing.

Sure he preaches motivational sermons – when they're comprehensible, at least – but then there's also the unfortunate incident of his interaction with that common floozy that was taken in adultery – caught in the very act, in flagrante delicto, as they say. (Have you ever noticed how much joy people seem to take out of uttering that Latin phrase?)

The scribes and Pharisees knew just exactly what was required, and they so they dragged her out into the street to meet justice, and what does he do but start drawing stick figures in the sand in front of each of them – who knows what words he wrote at the feet of each accuser – they were careful not to record them, after all.

This is the messiah? There's no order, there's no tradition, there's no decorum – *this is the messiah!?!?!?*

“Tell us plainly, now, are *you* the messiah?”

It seems to me to be sort of a dangerous thing to embrace a messiah like this.

“Tell us plainly.”

This is going to cost you.

There is no mistaking that the Gospel is costly in John. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, when it comes to the last supper, it is clear that it is a Passover meal.

But that's not so in John. In John, the meal is just an ordinary meal. Passover is the next day. Jesus is the Passover lamb.

And lest we think that this represents some harshness on the part of God toward Jesus, here, in this very passage Jesus reiterates once more, “The Father and I are one.”

Whatever we may say about the messiah today we cannot say that grace is anything other than costly.

For those who maintain the temple establishment this overturning of Sabbath regulation and free dispensation of God's grace is going to cost them something.

And so any messiah who is to reflect the nature of God's grace is going to face a steep cost themselves. Jesus becomes the Passover lamb, the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

The definition of messiah that Jesus is using is one that comes straight from the self-sacrificing, self-giving heart of God.

If you want an easy messiah to follow, Jesus isn't it.

If you want a tame messiah to hold, Jesus isn't it.

If you want a cheap messiah who asks nothing of you, Jesus isn't it.

Tell us plainly, are you the messiah?

You may be wondering, right about now, what happened to the easy yoke? After all, throughout the pages of scripture, Jesus is always talking about his burden being light, his yoke being easy, isn't he?

You know what a yoke is, don't you? It's that device that holds two work animals side by side so that they are forced to pull together.

Did you know that in the Law, that portion of scripture that we tend to avoid because it's about such things as Sabbath-keeping, and purity requirements after menstruation, and stoning people for adultery, that portion of the scriptures actually has rules about how to yoke animals? Did you know that God expressly prohibits yoking animals unevenly?

It's about kindness – an uneven match would over-burden the stronger animal, overwork the weaker animal and probably kill them both over time.

But Jesus voluntarily does all the work. When we are invited to tie ourselves to Jesus, it is after he has already made all the sacrifice that will ever have to be made for our salvation. That's the sort of messiah he is. That's what it means to share the yoke with him.

That's the sort of messiah he is: no more back of the bus for the Samaritans. Not one minute more delay for healing, not for the Sabbath, not ever. No more vigilante oppression in the streets with stones in hand.

No more status quo.

Which is great, unless of course, you like the status quo.

If you like the status quo, well then, "Tell us plainly."

This is going to cost you.

Now, just so we're clear here, I'm not talking about money. The church does ask its members to give to support the work of the Gospel. Everything this congregation does is done because you make it possible – there's no great ministry slush-fund out there that funds our operations. You do.

But that's not what we're talking about. When Jesus invites us to come and follow him, he means our whole lives.

It's not a pick and choose prospect.

Let's pause another moment and clarify one more thing: the call of Jesus on our lives is total and complete, and that means it is a call on our minds as well. We are not expected to blithely repeat platitudes about faith and following that reinforce the very barriers and harmful patterns that Jesus went down to death to obliterate. Nothing could be further from the truth. But it does mean that as we think about the call of Jesus on our lives it is not a cafeteria arrangement. We can't take a little Jesus in church and think that Jesus isn't present at the bank, the bar, the bedroom and the boardroom.

You see the problem with messiahs is that is that if they are authentic they mirror the God who anointed them and Jesus is crystal clear about this even as he claiming the whole lives of his followers, that the Father and he are one.

Tell us plainly? He told us plainly. “I have told you,” he said.

Yes, the yoke is easy and the burden is light, but the same Jesus told us that those who would lose their lives for his sake would gain them and those who would preserve their lives, preserve the status quo for their own sake would lose them.

This is not a partial calling. “I have told you,” he said.

This is good news for all for whom the status quo isn’t good enough. For all for whom the status quo means more of the same, more gun violence, more racism, more homophobia, more economic elitism – for all for whom the status quo fails, this is good news.

Of course, for those of us who *like* the status quo, “Tell us plainly, now Jesus, are you the messiah?”

Whether we like the status quo or not, the kingdom is coming. We pray for it weekly with the words of the Lord’s Prayer. Perhaps we wonder, with this messiah who has come, when that kingdom is going to show up?

But John Dominic Crossan puts a new spin on that when he asks the question just what sort of a Messiah we are looking for, just what sort of a messiah that Jewish audience in John would have been looking for. And Crossan concludes from the words of Jesus himself that the sort of messiah that Jesus set out to be is a messiah who seeks collaboration from us in the redemption of the world. “You have been waiting for God,”

Crossan hypothetically sees Jesus asking, “while God has been waiting for you. No wonder nothing is happening.”

Or perhaps I can put it just a little bit more plainly. We’re all familiar with the good news of the Gospel – God loves us, Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead marking God’s redemption of creation – that grace is free, and that nothing we could ever do will make God love us one bit less. We’re all familiar with the good news of the Gospel. But have you considered the bad news of the Gospel? It’s the shadow side of the good news and it sounds like this: we’ve been redeemed and now God expects us to act like it in every imaginable way and in some we don’t yet imagine.

“Tell us plainly, are you the messiah?”

“I have told you,” says Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.