

June 22, 2014

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Sermon - 6/22/14, Proper 7, Matt 10: 24-39

Whatever happened to the Prince of Peace and Peace on Earth? I think of Jesus as the one who brings peace, but in the Gospel reading today Jesus says that he did not come to bring peace on the earth but he came to bring a sword. Is it Prince of Peace or sword bearing Messiah? Did we get it all wrong? No, of course not. It's really both. Jesus is certainly the King of Kings, born to bring Peace on Earth, but there's another aspect of his teaching that is crucial for us to pay attention to in order to be obedient disciples. Generally speaking, obedience is a word that we are used to associating with children, but in God's Kingdom, it also applies to adults. Our gospel passage today reflects what our obedience to Jesus entails. Jesus is prepping his disciples for the treacherous road that lies before them. He's telling them that they can expect what he himself will be faced with. In other words, He's putting the fear of God in them! But he does so with the reassurance that God is aware, present, and cares about them. Their ultimate reward will be in heaven. "Do not fear", he says three times in three different places during his talk with the disciples

We always have to be very careful about how we interpret Scripture. This is one of those passages that, if read literally, could be considered justification for violence and broken relationships in our lives today. In order to understand this passage differently and put it in a contemporary context that we can make sense of today, we have to consider the context in which it was written.

Mark's gospel was written after the temple was destroyed and after the Romans once again conquered Israel's homeland. Jews were determined to preserve their identity in a hostile world. They held on to their traditions while accusing the Jewish Christians of abandoning the traditions, vehemently proclaiming that they were no longer Jews. In Matthew, the conflict was between Jews. There was no separate Christian religion yet.

Jesus has already given the Sermon on the Mount listing the Beatitudes, and even though he assured them that he didn't come to abolish the laws but to fulfill them, his preaching was fueling the anger of the Pharisees. Jesus needed to make clear that things were different now. He was turning their world upside down and inside out. In the verses just before our reading, Jesus is sending out the disciples on their mission with instructions that clearly expose their vulnerability. He told them, take nothing with you - and go only to the Jews, not the Gentiles or the Samaritans, which made the mission even harder. He warned them, you will be arrested, flogged, and some of you even killed. "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves" he said. Can you imagine their fear? Can you imagine them thinking, "This isn't what I signed up for?" Wouldn't you be afraid?

This is the context of our Gospel reading this morning. Jesus knows what they are facing and tells them so but he explains that he is not there to negotiate some kind of compromise. He is there to bring about radical change, change that bears good fruit, change that leads us along a path towards the Kingdom of Heaven that is now, change that will make a difference in all people's lives. It is so radical that their own friends and

family might become hostile towards them. Mother's and daughters, fathers and sons will turn against each other. The metaphorical sword will create deep seated division. And yet, in the middle of telling them about the arena of hatred, estrangement and violence they are stepping into, he reminds them that they need not fear any of it. Jesus tells them, "If you lose your life for my sake, you will find life - everlasting life.

The disciples were in the midst of intense conflict within their Jewish community. Following Jesus put them in a position where they would have to make choices about their loyalties. Following Jesus even put them in serious danger. How does all this relate to us today? I would say that we, that is you and I, are hardly in grave danger simply because we are Christians. There are however Christians who are being persecuted all over the world. They live in fear. For them, the message from Jesus to the disciples in Matthew could be encouraging and offer very real hope.

It wasn't that long ago that the Baptist minister and civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. faced persecution right here in our own country. With unshakable faith, he flooded his sermons with scripture from both the Old and New Testament to show why segregation was wrong and why equality for people of color was right - why discrimination was wrong and non-violence was right. On the outside he appeared confident and fearless, but on the inside he surely had his moments of fear. In his book "Strength to Love" he tells the story of an elderly black woman affectionately called Mother Pollard. One night after he spoke at a gathering, Mother Pollard came up to him, sensing that something was wrong. She said to him, "You didn't talk straight tonight!" It was true. The threats against his life were coming fast and furiously and he writes in his book that he was "inwardly depressed and fear-stricken." Mother Pollard saw through his facade and, without knowing what exactly was going on, took him aside and said, "God's gonna take care of you." Her few simple, and very true words, became a mantra for him on his remarkable journey.

While we might not be victims of the same kind of hatred that Martin Luther King Jr. or Jesus' disciples in the first century fell victim to, I'm certain that we all have fears - fear of losing family or friends, of upsetting the applecart, of offending someone. We gather together in this community on Sundays knowing that, although we don't all think alike on hot button issues in our world today, we don't have to fear losing friends or fear being forced out of the church. We love each other. It is relatively easier here. But for some of us, there are times when proclaiming our faith doesn't seem as comfortable. When we step outside these walls, when we drive out of the parking lot, we enter a different space. We leave the St. Stephen's nest and go out into the world to places like Morgan Hill and San Jose where we interact with people who don't necessarily share our faith. How far are we willing to step out of our comfortable cubby to take a stand, make a statement or answer a call to action based on our Christian faith?

I'd like to share a story that happened a few years ago. It's a great example of what it means to stand up for one's faith in spite of possible consequences. Tom Good had been working at the Almaden Country Club for many years. Every year they have a big Holiday Sale in the pro-shop at Christmas time. One year, the General Manager decided that the Annual Christmas Sale was going to the Annual Holiday Sale. That didn't sit well with Tom and he made it known. He took the stand that the sign needed to remain Christmas rather than Holiday. He went so far as to say that if it changed, he would resign. I don't know if that was an immediate decision or one that he mulled over

for a day or so. Either way, there was probably a tinge of fear in there somewhere or maybe a knot in his stomach. Would he lose his job? Will his colleagues ostracize him? The good news is that the signed stayed. There was not a Holiday Sale that year, there was a Christmas sale.

Being a Christian in today's world isn't always easy, but Jesus says we must take up our cross and no, it's not going to be easy. He says, You have to choose me over everyone and everything else. You have to make waves. C.S. Lewis describes the paradox of the life of a Christian this way:

“The Christian way is different: harder and easier. . . Jesus himself sometimes describes the Christian way as very hard, sometimes as very easy. [Jesus] says, “Take up your Cross.” The next minute he says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” He means both.”

Taking up your cross means being a disciple even in the face of fear. It also means that we should always be discerning what we are standing up for or making waves about. How do we know if we are on the right path? We pray. We look at the fruit we bear and the lives we touch. What I find that sometimes helps me is asking that rhetorical question, “What might Jesus do or say?”

Are there situations in your life now that you feel you need to take that extra step to speak up because of your faith? Consider taking the step. Don't be afraid, Jesus says. Have no fear. God knows the number of every hair on our heads. That level of intimacy shows just how much God loves us. God will always be watching. God will always take care of us. Let us rejoice in the ever loving God who sustains us, especially in all our fears.