

Sermon for Proper 7A
Sunday, June 25, 2023
“Don’t be afraid to be a disciple”

Text: Matthew 10:24-39

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s text from the 10th Chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel is undoubtedly one of the more difficult texts to deal with. The wisdom that Jesus gives to his disciples is very unnerving and somewhat confusing. To somebody hearing Jesus in his time, the declaration that he had come to pit “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” echoed the words of the prophet Micah (Micah 7:6) and would have been a horrible suggestion, because family relationships were so very important to people at that time, especially relationships between one’s parents or woman’s in-laws. Parents were supposed to be respected—“honor your father and your mother” says one of the commandments. So why did Jesus say what he said the way he said it?

You remember in last Sunday’s Gospel, “Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.” (Matthew 10:1) Then he named the twelve disciples, and sent them out with the following instructions: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.” (Matthew 10:8-9) Jesus called his disciples and gave them their marching orders and a warning: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me.” (Matthew 10:16-18a) Jesus was preparing his disciples for the reality of their calling; as they proceed to cast out unclean spirits, cure diseases, and proclaim that the kingdom has come near, they will also face opposition, persecution, and possibly even death. The gospel text for today continues that preparation; Jesus tells the disciples not to fear: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Today’s lesson is really a pep talk for the hard work of discipleship, and the seemingly harsh words that Jesus issues are a heads up to the disciples that they’re going to go against tradition, challenge the status quo, but if they let fear get over them, that will be the cause of their mission to fail.

I’m going to reread some of today’s gospel lesson in the words of *The Message*, which is a paraphrase of the Bible; that means, it’s not a direct translation from the text in its original language, but it’s a retelling of the story using words and images that resonate with us in our own context. Here’s what *The Message* says:

“Don’t be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There’s nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life—body and soul—in his hands. What’s the price of a pet canary? Some loose change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail—even numbering the hairs on your head! So don’t be intimidated by all this bully talk. You’re worth more than a million canaries. Stand up for me against world opinion and I’ll stand up for you before my Father in heaven. If you turn tail and run, do you think I’ll cover for you? “Don’t think I’ve come to make life cozy. I’ve come to cut—make a sharp knife-cut between son and father, daughter and mother, bride and mother-in-law—cut through these cozy domestic arrangements and free you for God. Well-meaning family members can be your worst enemies. If you prefer father or mother over me, you don’t deserve me. If you prefer son or daughter over me, you don’t deserve me. If you don’t go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you don’t deserve me. If your first concern is to look after yourself, you’ll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you’ll find both yourself and me.” (Matthew 10:28-39)

Following Jesus carried a cost. He challenged his followers to be ready, and not to fear. Jesus was teaching them about a new way to live and a new way of being, even if the conservatives didn’t like it. The status quo didn’t want to change, and that would put them in opposition, even with the people closest to them.

Taking up the cross, as Jesus called his disciples to do, meant that they would need the courage to fight for the marginalized of their day (widows, orphans, the disabled, Samaritans, slaves, prostitutes, tax collectors, anyone whom society wanted to push aside) and that would mean confronting Roman power itself. That message couldn’t be more timely for us, as modern-day disciples. This past week we celebrated Juneteenth. This weekend, New York City celebrates Pride for the GLBTQ+ community. The gospel calls us all to speak out against the injustice of police brutality, the terrible sin of racism, the blasphemy of discrimination against any of God’s children and the perpetuation of the institutionalized inequality of so many people in our nation. Today’s gospel is our pep talk. We cannot be afraid to speak up for what is right. We cannot be afraid to defend our sisters and brothers who are hurting and being hurt. We cannot be afraid to call out the powers of our nation when their actions do not defend the dignity of every human being or support the freedoms of every person within our borders. We cannot be afraid to speak out against pushing aside those who live at the margins: the elderly, the physically and mentally challenged, the poor, the disadvantaged. We cannot be afraid to use whatever privilege we think we might have to help improve the lives of others who may not enjoy such privileges. In this nation, we enjoy the privilege of voting, a privilege that reaches across age, race, economic status, and education; those of us with that privilege must use it to make sure we have leaders who

support the dignity and freedom of every citizen and anyone else who wants to become one, even if that means taking an unpopular stance. Sixty years ago, the civil rights movement challenged the status quo of institutionalized racism and segregation; fifty-five years ago Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was martyred for his taking up his cross and living the Jesus's call. We've come a long way in the past six decades, but even today, we are not finished with the struggle for human dignity.

Taking up our cross is not an easy task, but God is always in our midst, working among us to give us strength in whatever battles we face. We need not fear the opinions of our family, our friends, our contacts on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, or the powers who want to keep things the way they've been, because God is with us. God is merciful, God is faithful, God is just, and God is loving. As disciples of Jesus Christ and as ones created in his image, we, too, must be merciful, faithful, just, and loving. Amen.

Resources

Stanley Saunders, "Commentary on Matthew 10:24-39,"
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2098

The Message, accessed through www.biblegateway.com/