

## Hard Choices

Last week, we celebrated. We thanked one another for the many different ways in which we have all added to the life of this community over the past twelve months. I reminded you all that every one of us has something to add to the fabric of our life together, even if that addition is as simple as showing up and standing (or sitting) as a witness to the love of God in our lives. Our joined efforts to make this place a place of peace and beauty and learning lead to the strengthening of our individual efforts to take those reflections of God's grace out into our broader community. As we carry the love of God, so manifest here, out into the world so badly in need of it, we are truly laborers for the harvest, working with God to bring all people and places into the Beloved Community.

But this week we are reminded by Jesus that even the work of blessing the world comes with dangers and disappointments. As the cynics among us, myself included, sometimes say, "No good deed goes unpunished." That's the nature of the world we live in, where many gestures of love are misunderstood or rejected. Sometimes it's because we, broken as we are, are unable to offer the gifts in way people can understand or accept them. Sometimes it's because those to whom we offer loving truth, broken as we are, feel disrespected, unjustly opposed, or even attacked. To pick up the mantle of Jesus is never easy. To pick up the mantle of Jesus is also to pick up a cross. But, thanks be to God, we know that the cross, however painful it may be, is never the final word in life under God. The final word is life and the final word is love and the final word is resurrection.

We should remember as we look at our verses this morning that they follow on the heels of Jesus naming the twelve and giving them both responsibility and authority. Verse one of chapter ten tells us that "Jesus... gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." You would think that such power would make them wildly popular but, remember, Jesus not only gave such power, he also possessed it and yet he was betrayed, abandoned, denied, tortured and executed. If ordinary people, just like us, could do such a thing to the best man who ever lived, how can we, ordinary people, expect any better?

As Jesus went, healing and preaching, he reminds us, he was often accused of having a demon or being in league with the powers of darkness. When people have become accustomed to living in the shadow of evil, when the dimmed light has come to seem ordinary and comfortable, a bright light may seem frightening, even painful. Jesus shone such a bright light into the darkness of life that his followers could only explain it by calling him the Anointed One of God, the Messiah, the Christ. Many flocked to him and his light but those who cringed and shrank away called him Beelzebul, a devil. The flickering light we offer can even more easily be dismissed as unworthy. "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!" Australian theologian William Loader writes, "Living out the kingdom in the present in ways that disempower evil and evil's powers is also the task of the disciples and for this they will pay. Today the 'swear words' will not be Beelzebub, but 'bleeding hearts', 'leftists', 'welfare lobby'... and the like. People use names to disempower others." In the South of my youth some of those names were (and I beg pardon for using the offensive terms) 'fag hag' or 'sissy boy' or 'nigger-lover.' Today, maybe it would be 'special snowflake.'

The reality is that whenever you challenge people's lifestyles or allegiances or presuppositions, even in love, they will attempt to overturn your witness however they can. If they cannot

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successfully argue against you, they will, as Loader says, attempt to disempower you with name-calling, derision, and even violence. At a recent City Council meeting, we were called on to decide policy on a subject that had engaged not only the concern but the passion of a number of our neighbors. After weeks of testimony on both sides, which had occasionally degraded into relatively mild *ad hominem* arguments about the veracity and integrity of opponents, the final night's comments were to the point, sincere, and without hostility. During my turn to speak before the vote, I complimented participants on their conduct during the final arguments. The matter was decided and the meeting concluded. When I left the Chambers, I encountered a number of people whose arguments I'd ultimately voted against. They immediately engaged me in conversation, telling me how I'd disappointed them. I answered politely and they joined me as I exited the building. Walking to my car, one of them, a man much larger than myself, put his arm around my shoulders in what I first assumed was a friendly gesture. But as we walked, his grip became tighter and the diatribe from the man and a woman who was with him became harsher and more personal. I found myself thinking, "Am I going to have to fight my way out of this?" In the event, I was able to shrug his arm away and get in my car. They walked on, shouting insults back at me as they went. I had been honest and, I thought, caring in my public response to their cause but I had disagreed with them and that was enough to put me, at least briefly, in danger. These were nice people, intelligent, engaged, doing their best to look out for the interests of themselves and others, righteous in their own minds. But I could easily picture them shouting, "Crucify him!"

Was I afraid of them that night? Yes, I was. Would it have changed my vote had I known that was what was waiting for me? No, not at all. I had studied the subject, I had listened carefully to the testimony, and I had consulted other experts. But it was not for me a matter of ultimate concern. My faith in God and my faithfulness to God in Christ is of ultimate concern to me and, I believe, to those of you who are here this morning. Nothing I can conceive of would make me break that faith because as much as I might fear pain and death, I love God more.

Please note that I said "I love God more" not "I fear God more." Yes, I know that's what Matthew tells us that Jesus said and, indeed, he may well have said it just that way. But I have spoken here before about "the fear of God." We need to remember that the way we use the word "fear" has morphed in English and I am disappointed that the New Revised Standard Version of our Scriptures has not taken that into account. In Elizabethan and Jacobian times, when the Bible was first translated into English, the word had much more to do with respect for authority and power and reverence for the divine than with the emotion of fright or terror. A quick review of the way the word is used in Matthew leads me to think that a more apt current translation would be "worry." At any rate, Jesus puts fear or worry about God's response to us in immediate context: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." "His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me."

These verses do, however, remind us that our good faith is expected. If we cave in to societal pressures, if we say one thing and do another, we will, upon self-examination, be made aware of our own hypocrisy. William Loader also writes, "Mouthing the words of the kingdom while not allowing one's life to participate in God's liberating work in the world is playing a religious game

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which will be exposed. This has less to do with vengeance and more to do with being brought to face the truth about ourselves. Matthew has no room for hypocrisy.” To return to an earlier metaphor, we do not want to live in such a way that the bright light of God shining upon our lives would bring us shame. We all make mistakes or at least I assume we all do because I certainly do. And we are, in God’s eyes, worth at least as much as the sparrows. But I know that when I behave faithlessly, my worth in my own eyes is questionable at best. I might say that the Holy Spirit within me convicts me of my bad faith. If we are in Christ, then we can feel his disappointment pulling us away from hypocritical choices.

Perhaps the most problematic sections of our passage this morning are in the verses about peace and the sword and about families. To rightly understand Jesus’ remarks about swords and families, we need to hear his words not as intent but as unfolding reality. Here’s what Stanley Saunders, Associate Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta writes about bringing a sword: “although Jesus has called his disciples to be peacemakers, his mission does not bring peace, but a sword, so long as the powers resist God’s rule and will. The very act of peacemaking, as Jesus’ ministry demonstrates, generates violence, for healing, restoration, and the conquest of death threaten the foundations of all human assertions of power in defiance of God.” Those of us who witnessed the Civil Rights era know this to be true. Those who challenged the systemic evil of segregation and sought to raise African-Americans to the same level of life as enjoyed by White Americans were knocked down by fire hoses, had dogs set on them, were beaten, and even killed. In South and Central America, priests and nuns have been assassinated for trying to give the poor the hope of the Gospel – Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador is only the most well-known. Just months ago, protestors against the Dakota Access Pipeline, including members of the Standing Rock Sioux for whom the land affected is sacred, were subject to water cannons in the cold of winter as well as to attack dogs. Anytime the status quo and the “powers that be” are threatened, even peacefully and lovingly, the sword will appear.

In Jesus’ time and place, the powers that be were the religious hierarchy and the representatives of the Roman Empire. It is not necessary to attribute ill motive to either group. It may fairly be said that the Sanhedrin turned Jesus over to the Romans with a request for execution because they didn’t want him stirring up trouble that might lead to more widespread reprisals. Likewise, it may be fairly said that the Romans were just trying to keep peace in a volatile region. These rationales sound very modern, very understandable, and, hopefully, very wrong. The ends do not justify the means. Scapegoating never solves a problem in the long-term. But let us make no mistake, my friends. We still live in a society where scapegoating is a common response. Our police forces still send troublemakers to jail or worse. Our nation is one of the current Imperial powers, given to arming our allies who ruthlessly suppress dissent. Sometimes, we even still intervene ourselves. America’s doctrines of military intervention are not based on a careful examination of right and wrong but of power and of expediency. This has been true under Republican administrations and under Democratic administrations. It is the nature of human power, left unchecked.

What this means for us is that we can expect the same treatment as the Selma marchers or the Standing Rock protestors, if we are noisy enough. It also means that, depending on the cause and the situation of individuals within our families, we can be set against our fathers, our

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mothers, our sons and our daughters, our cousins and spouses, all whom normal family bonds make dear to us. I've told you about how I stood against my uncle at a family reunion when he consistently used that derogatory word for Black people and that came out as well as could be expected. I don't think I changed his life but he cares enough about me not to speak that way in my presence. His daughter, my cousin, and I are no longer in touch via Facebook because she could not understand my stance against the continued use of the Confederate battle flag. Another cousin and I had to take a "cooling off" period because of my opposition to various oil pipeline projects. For me, it is a moral question of a pollutant being disseminated in a far-from-foolproof network, endangering aquifers and farmland. For her, it is a question of available jobs for her husband and many other members of our extended family who work as pipeliners. Eventually, we agreed to leave the question out of our dialog – we were dear friends as children and those ties go deep. But oil can be thicker than blood.

Perhaps the cousin with whom I am still in good communication is different from the other cousin from whom I am alienated because the first is active in Christian faith and the other is not. That doesn't mean we are always going to agree. Sometimes, our stands on issues are more driven by our own fallen agendas than by the Spirit. But to agree to love each other even in disagreement is surely a mark of the fruits of the Spirit which, in Paul's list, are led by love and include forbearance and gentleness. Perhaps it's because oil may be thicker than blood but the Holy Spirit is thicker and stickier than either. As members of the Body of Christ, we can depend on our fellow members in a way beyond our dependence on others. Our family of faith is often closer to us in love and harmony than our family of blood.

Maybe my cousin still puts up with me because I am her cross to bear. Or maybe she is mine. Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him but he does not tell us what our cross is. It is not his own. None of us are called to be Jesus.<sup>2</sup> None of us are called to die on behalf of all humanity and none of us are called to suffer crucifixion in the literal sense. Jesus' tasks were Jesus' tasks and they have been accomplished. But each of us has a calling and each of us is going to have to lug around a hurdle or a heartbreak or an ongoing challenge. To take up the cross means to accept the challenge of living life in awareness of Jesus and his cross – what he has brought us as well as what it cost him. If all was well in our world, living life according to our understanding of the message of Jesus would be easy. Everyone would be in agreement and life would be sweet. It's like the old joke about the car that the apostles all rode in – they were all in one Accord.

But we know that life is not like that. Even if we are scrupulous about the stands we take for what we perceive as right, we are going to encounter opposition. Even if we manage to rise above self-interest every single moment and only seek what is best for all, someone is going to stand against us. If we stand for those whom Jesus called "the least of these" the ones we call "the powers that be" are likely to object because it will cost them something. Listen to this from Stanley Saunders: "Taking up the cross implies identification with the marginal people (slaves and rebels) who were subject to Roman crucifixion, because they did not align themselves with or submit themselves to Rome's authority." Don't think for a minute that such a choice is any more popular with those who hold power in our society than it was in Rome. But these are the choices that Jesus calls us to make.

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We are left at the end of the passage with one of the great paradoxes of which Jesus was so fond: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Like any good paradox, this saying cannot be unwound without losing its meaning but those of us who are in the midst of discovering its meaning have an innate sense of where we are traveling. Jesus lost his life and it was given back to him. Peter and Andrew and John and James left behind their nets and became fishers of men. Saul of Tarsus went from promising young Pharisee leader to itinerant preacher of the very heresy he’d set out to destroy, subject to unbelievable depredations and death but counted himself content. We may be called to leave behind family. We may be subjected to the sword. We will have to make hard choices. We will make those hard choices knowing that we are watched over, that the very hairs on our heads are counted. We will make those hard choices on rough paths, in deep waters, in fiery trials. We will make those hard choices with the footprints of Jesus in our sight, with his love all around us. We may lose our lives but in doing so we will find them. Thanks be to God.