

## Like Our Teacher

### Matthew 10:24-39

<sup>24</sup> "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; <sup>25</sup> it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they malign those of his household!

<sup>26</sup> "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>27</sup> What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup> And even the hairs of your head are all counted. <sup>31</sup> So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

<sup>32</sup> "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; <sup>33</sup> but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

<sup>34</sup> "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

<sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

<sup>36</sup> and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

<sup>37</sup> Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Today, with Matthew's community, we overhear Jesus' instructions to the Twelve before sending them out and so find ourselves challenged to consider our own role in spreading his kingdom message in word and deed (10:7-8). Jesus said: it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher. Not surprisingly (for an activity that intends radical transformations of the social order), this kingdom mission leads to conflict. The difficulty in preaching today's text is not the complexity of its

concepts, but the seeming disconnect between the palpable threats of the world it displays and the "safe" world most of us inhabit.

So, *what does it mean to be like Jesus?* It is easy to assume from chapter 9 that Jesus would be talking about his compassion and his ministry, but the answers given in this text can be unsettling. Jesus turns down the role of predictable, innocuous do-gooder: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace ... but a sword" (v. 34). Evidently there is peace, and then there is *peace*. The demands of the prince of true peace may very well feel like a sword cutting through lesser loyalties and making quick work of our flabby, commonsense morality.

If Jesus were really the enlightened and affirming nice guy, we often insist on imagining, should he not have been able to stay out of trouble? What incited people to call him such appalling names (prince, not of peace, but of demons! v. 25)? Why would following him wreck families (vv. 35-36)? How did he end up on a cross (v. 38)?

The answer is not that his opponents had strange and unsettling ideas, but that he did. Contrary to popular opinion and bestselling books, not everything the follower of Jesus needs to know can be learned in kindergarten. Kingdom work, it turns out, is more controversial and subversive than conventional kindness. If the teacher gives offense, how much more the student (v. 25)? True discipleship is the art of seeking the kingdom with single-minded determination (6:33) and letting the chips fall where they may. **Lance Pape**

Commentator William Goettler shares this about his mother-in-law Connie and our scripture. Connie, a faithful Christian woman, needs no lectionary commentary to know that she does not like this passage. She refuses to listen to his argument that this is but a collection of sayings given by Jesus to the disciples as they set out on a mission of healing and preaching good news. She knows already that the life of faith will include times of struggle and even opposition—she is a

faithful Christian laywoman, after all. Every Christian disciple knows that along the way of faith, some disciples will suffer as Christ suffered, and that the community of the faithful must seek to persevere even in times of fear.

But in this passage, Connie insists, Jesus goes too far. The Jesus that she knows comes to bring peace, not a sword. While she has spent enough time around the church to recognize that discord happens within the community of the faithful, her Jesus would never have encouraged such division in the midst of family.

Here is Jesus promising to set a son against his father and a daughter against her mother. "Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (v. 37), Connie reads, shaking her head. "How," she wonders, "did this ever get into the Bible?" Connie's concern is a concern that is surely shared by many of us listening to this sermon. If this is true, how does the gospel speak to profound human need? How does the power of the gospel speak to our deepest challenges? We live in a society that is well acquainted with familial discord. We know of family dysfunction and disunity.

So, does this text say what, at first glance, it seems to be saying? Does it justify a religious cult's determination to split families apart? No, this Scripture does not so advocate. Jesus is actually addressing the faithful who seek to live into their Christian faith while facing conflict and discouragement, and even the threat to their physical well-being, because of the gospel's calling.

Sent on a mission of preaching and healing, the disciples have quickly learned what it means to face opposition and struggle. The cozy days of breaking bread with Jesus seem far distant when in response to the good news of the gospel they are rewarded with persecution. This will be a part of the Christian story in every generation to follow. "What are we to do when we realize that we are not strong enough to prevail?" Christians will ask.

The church will persevere, Matthew declares, in spite of all of the trials of this life. Even in times of fear, the gospel will be true. What of the individual disciple? The individual—and even the family, for that matter—must be of less concern than the overarching importance of proclaiming God's word. For individual lives, family structures, and the whole of society will thrive when the gospel's good news is heard and embraced. Until that time, we need not fear those who will destroy the body, for they cannot harm the soul. No death, not the death of a person or even of a sparrow, occurs but for God's will. Jesus is asking the faithful to keep on because of our love for him and because, in the end, it will be real and everlasting life that we find.

In the face of the conflict that disciples and Christian missionaries can expect, in the face even of personal and familial turmoil, Tom Long writes that four things will be seen. First, the Holy Spirit will surely be present and will never abandon us. Second, we will come to recognize that our suffering is not wasted but is a testimony to faith. Third, even in the midst of our hardships, we will know that nothing can eradicate the gospel or destroy God's loving and watchful care over the faithful. Finally, while family disruption will surely take place, Jesus is not against the family. Rather, there will be times when allegiance to Jesus causes a crisis of loyalty and forces a decision. The gospel shakes up values, rearranges priorities, and reorients goals. Writes Long, "To give one's life away in the name of Christ is to be given all that makes life free, holy and good."

Connie is right when she challenges those who read this text as an invitation to family disunity, in the name of faith. Jesus invites us, instead, to recognize a faith that is able to overcome fear during persecution. Believers who know that their fate is in the hands of a loving God will understand that in this life there is nothing to fear.

It is in the life of Christian discipleship that the providence of God can be known. No power is greater, no assurance, more sound. What a remarkable offering of peace, for the sake of love.

Armed with such an assurance, we believers are empowered to approach the cross in a new way. No more does the cross mean a passive acceptance of the injustice and misery of this creation. Instead, the cross is a sign of the realm of God that is to come, a strength that can be known by those who are obedient to the call of Jesus Christ in our lives. Those who live by the light of faith challenge the evil powers of this world with the certainty of believers, knowing that the way of God will prevail against every hurt and every challenge.

“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master.” This is our invitation to witness without fear, because the Spirit of God is with us. **William Goettler**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).