

Sunday, June 21, 2020
Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 7 (Year A)

Matthew 10.24-39

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/269730897776951/>

(Sermon begins at about 14:45)

“Take Up Your Cross”

Today’s Gospel reading is very complex. And, to be honest, a bit difficult to hear. Who of us is not uncomfortable with, even disturbed by, Jesus words: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt 10.34)? And then he goes on to talk about family member being set against family member. These are uncomfortable words to hear. These are uncomfortable images that seem to go against what we know of and think about Jesus. After all, we refer to him as the Prince of Peace. We think of him as the Good Shepherd, lovingly caring for his sheep. He preached a message of love for all humanity. Yet here, what he says is completely counter to our comfortable and comforting ideas of who Jesus is. But before we go too far down that rabbit hole, let’s step back to the beginning of our Gospel lesson.

Our Gospel for today is a continuation of last week’s instructions to the twelve apostles before Jesus sends them out to do ministry in his name—to heal the sick, to exorcise demons, and to “proclaim the good news [that] the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 10.7). Last week’s Gospel ended with Jesus telling those who are sent of the potential persecution that may occur while doing ministry. Particularly persecution from both Jewish and Roman authorities.

In light of this, he shifts in today’s excerpt from the Gospel to words of comfort and encouragement. Three times he tells the apostles not to fear. “Have no fear” of the authorities and the forces of darkness, because there is “nothing [that is] secret that will not become known” (Mt 10.26). “Do not fear” because these authorities may be able to kill the body, but they cannot kill the soul (Mt 10.28). “Do not be afraid” because they are of great value to God (Mt 10.31). All this being Jesus’ way of telling those sent out to minister in his name that there is no need to fear because they are valuable servants of God, bearing the image and likeness of God, and as such, they are sent out to reveal the secrets of the kingdom to a world so in need of hearing the Good News. The underlying message is that they have been prepared for this sacred work. At times, that work will not be easy. But they are to remain faithful to that work even in the face of obstacles and potential persecution.

This is a holy pep talk. But not just for the twelve apostles. It is directed to all who follow Jesus. It is a pep talk for all who are sent out to minister in his name. It is a pep talk for each and every one of us. Do not fear. You can do this.

But then Jesus shifts from “rah, rah, go team” to the sobering reality of what this sacred work will entail. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” That the work that Jesus came to do, that the work he is sending his

followers out to do, is not about maintaining the status quo. It's about turning things upside down. It's about looking at the world around us and honestly assessing how it stacks up against the good news of the kingdom of heaven. It's about looking at society and its institutions to determine if the way they operate are consistent with the core values of God's kingdom. Does what we see truly reflect our foundational commandments to love God and to love others as ourselves?

Certainly, in Jesus' day, the answer was "no." The temple authorities were corrupt. They interpreted the Law to their own advantage, with no regard for the impact their actions had on the people. Particularly on the poor, the sick and infirmed, the widowed, the orphaned, the marginalized. And these were their own people. Then there was the Roman Empire. A foreign system of domination whose sole purpose was to oppress the people of Israel so as to be able to exploit them, to appropriate their resources, to further the wealth and power of the Empire.

Two thousand years later and a half a world away, things are not so different in our own time and in our own land. We continue to live in a society in which so many of our institutions and systems, even our very culture, are designed to provide advantages for some, with no regard for the impact their actions have on others. Systems designed to oppress and treat as lesser those who are deemed as "other." Persons of color, to be sure. But also, gays and lesbians; transgendered persons; those who are differently abled; and in many places still, those who are female. Systems of domination whose purpose is to oppress and exploit some of the people, to further the wealth and power of others.

Does what we see in our own time and in our own land truly reflect our foundational commandments to love God and to love others as ourselves? To answer that question, you need look no further than the nightly news, where we see thousands upon thousands of our brothers and sisters protesting in the streets of virtually every city in this country. Protesting the same systems of corruption and oppression Jesus condemned. This is not peace, but rather the metaphorical sword. The sword Jesus wielded in hopes of bringing about the change needed to allow his people to live into the values of the kingdom he proclaimed. The sword that so many of our sisters and brothers wield in hopes of bringing about the changes needed to allow all people of this land to live into the values we profess with our lips, yet which are denied through our own actions and actions ostensibly done on our behalf.

In his words to his apostles—to all who are sent in his name—Jesus warns of what wielding the sword of justice and reconciliation can and will mean. Family member will be set against family member. Those who carry out the sacred work Jesus commands may well find themselves at odds with those they love. But as he says, "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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Mt 10.37-38). In other words, as those who profess to follow Christ, our primary allegiance is to him and to his commandments. Our number one priority is to obey and follow Jesus. Even if it means putting us at odds with those closest to us. In this statement, Jesus is redefining family. Our true family is not about blood or inheritance, but about being members of the family of God. As such, our values are to be consistent with God's values. That we are to be concerned with those of greatest concern to God. Even if doing so may not be popular with those around us.

The gravity of this is conveyed in Jesus' statement that we must take up our cross and follow him. Despite popular conceptions, this has absolutely nothing to do with the little burdens or inconveniences that we encounter in our daily lives. When Jesus asks us to take up our cross, he is implying something far greater. He is not, however, necessarily talking about death. There is no reason to believe that Jesus' talk of taking up the cross is a reference to the way he will die. At least at this point in Matthew's Gospel, he has not predicted his own death. Here, his reference to the cross is meant to invoke a very particular image that would have been well understood by those living under Roman oppression. The cross was a means of execution reserved for traitors, violent criminals, and foreigners. Those who were perceived as a threat to the Roman Empire. Jesus is saying that those who follow him are to identify with those who threaten the Empire. With those who threaten the status quo. That they—we—are to be those who threatened the status quo.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I know Jesus' words are not easy to hear. They make us uncomfortable. They make us nervous. They may even scare us. But they are timely, and oh so relevant to where we find ourselves at this point in our history as a nation, even in our history as Church. Four weeks of protests against the status quo demonstrate that the calling out of racial injustice and inequality in our own systems and in our own culture is not going to go away. That the demand for change to those systems of oppression is not going to go away. That the time of peace has been an illusion. An illusion that can only be shattered with the sword. The metaphorical sword of Christ's love and God's values that will cut out those systems and practices of racism designed to benefit some of us by oppressing others of us.

We have seen movement in this area. Since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis a month ago, governments around our country have enacted laws making some small changes to these systems. Despite this, incidents like the death of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta one week ago show how deeply our systems of oppression and injustice run; show how deeply they are a part of our culture; show how much more needs to be done if we are to live into the vision of the kingdom of heaven Jesus has sent us to proclaim. The protests we see on the nightly news are the voices of our brothers and sisters in Christ crying out for justice, for true equality, for respect and dignity. They are the cries of hope that the words of Jesus are not just mere platitudes, but rather that his words are a promise that we may all one-day share—that the kingdom of heaven has indeed come near.

As members of the Body of Christ, our Lord implores us to take up the cross and follow him. He implores us to work to heal the sickness that plagues our society. He implores us to exorcise the demons of our own systems and institutions. He implores us to do this by identifying with those who threaten the status quo. Not just identify. As his body in the world, he implores us to BE those who threatened the status quo. Just as he threatened the status quo by going up against the systems of oppression in his own day.

This will not be easy work. There's no denying that. But it is work that must be done if we are to ever have a hope of living into God's vision for humanity. This is the sacred work that has been placed before us whether we like it or not. This sacred work is what Jesus is commanding us to go out and engage in.

To be honest, I don't even know what that work looks like or what it will entail. I have been in conversation with other faith leaders in our city, and we are all in different places on this journey. We all have different ideas of how we need to move forward. But we do agree on one thing—that we do need to move forward. We no longer have the luxury (if we ever even truly had it) of sitting by and doing nothing. We need to find our own responses. What that means for us as a parish community remains to be seen. Before I can even get a handle on that, I do know that I must do my own work. I need to educate myself about systemic racism and how it plays out in our nation, in our society, in our church, and in my own life. And I have begun doing that. I have taken up my cross. I invite you to do likewise. To take up your own cross. To begin doing your own part in this sacred work.

Jesus concludes today's Gospel reading by saying: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10.39). We must be willing to lose the life we have always known—the life that is the result of our cultural, governmental, and institutional systems that benefit some to the exclusion of others. To find the life that Jesus calls us to. A life where all are truly brother and sister in Christ. A life where all are truly equal and free to live into the fullness of who God created each of us to be. Only then will we be able to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

As we hear Jesus' command to us to take up our cross, we also need to remember how Jesus started today's Gospel. He tells those who are sent out—he tells us--do not be afraid. You can do this.