

Year A, Pentecost 2

June 22nd, 2014

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Matthew 10:24-39

Troubling Bits

On first reading our gospel sounds like an assortment of unrelated bits. But if we start from the right place we may discover a pattern that surprises us.

To make sense of it we must begin ten verses before our gospel lesson. Jesus says, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves." If we follow Jesus and go into the world we go as sheep among wolves. We will have no flesh-tearing teeth; for those belong to the critters we are in the midst of.

And it gets worse from there. "Beware of them (the opposition), 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." Why would following Jesus stir up so much animosity?

At any rate, when this happens, don't worry about what you will say. The Spirit of your Father speaking through you will give you the words. Somehow it's the Father's words speaking through us that stimulate the wolf-like behavior. This Jesus-instigated divide goes right through the heart of families so that "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death and you will be hated by all because of my name." What could cause this kind of disruption?

When this happens, and it surely will, says Jesus, "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Know what drives the human heart and connect to that bigger heart that has entered you in the form of the Spirit of Jesus. This is the only way you will be able to be "innocent as doves."

These kinds of things won't happen to us will they? The answer, "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master....If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, (a name for the satan) how much more will they malign those of his household!"

Yes, if we are following Jesus these sorts of things will happen. Maybe not as graphic or dire but we will experience them. When you do right by another sometimes the other uses your vulnerability to hurt you. When you follow Jesus as best you can and refrain from attack tactics often there is a price to pay. When your sight improves to the point where you see the world the way it really is, the world does not like it and may tear you apart. If they did this to Jesus do

you think they won't do it to you? How does the gospel of love, forgiveness and compassion light such fires?

Maybe this is part of the answer, "For nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." When we live in a way that deeply follows Jesus in the real world attacks come because truth is being told and secrets disclosed. Not philosophical truth but human truth; the truth about how families, groups, tribes and nations deal with their sin by pushing it into others. This is the truth the world prefers to hide and when the lived-gospel threatens to reveal it "you will be hated by all because of my name."

When Boko Haram kidnaped the 274 girls in Nigeria their actions revealed them as violent men far from God, whether Christian or Muslim. People everywhere saw they were deathly afraid of educated women who would claim equality with them and refuse to submit to their domination. Even with the girls still in bondage somewhere in Africa, the truth has been uncovered.

The proclamation of the gospel takes apart all cultures built on sacrificing some for the benefit of others. It deconstructs them by revealing the human cost some must pay.

Last week Laura and I saw the movie "Belle." The film beautifully deconstructs how English culture prospered and depended on the slave trade for economic prosperity and how virulent the opposition when the gospel-infused son of a clergyman tried to change it. This is the leavening of the gospel and it continues world-wide. In India women are banning together and refusing to allow Indian culture to dump its evil into them in the form of rape, murder, and oppression. Women are also speaking up in Egypt and throughout the Middle East. If you follow the news you will see it almost every day.

The gospel of Jesus wants to uncover all the places where innocent victims are being sacrificed on the altar of economics or empire. Such revelations bring push back. Those in power don't like to give up their privilege and find reasons to defend what they are used to. They might even resort to blasphemy, character assassination or violence. Do you see how following Jesus can get us in trouble?

To quote Michael Hardin, "The principalities and powers must stop the spread of the gospel. Its message of life and light is poison to death and darkness." Did any of you see the PBS special on the Freedom Riders this week? We saw actual footage of events early in the civil rights movement that illustrate what sheep being among wolves can look like.

One of the most misunderstood "bits" in today's reading has Jesus not bringing peace, but a sword. When you take this verse as a stand-alone, it sounds like a justification for revolutionary violence. But Jesus is talking about the inevitable violence that comes when Jesus

followers preach forgiveness and demonstrate mercy. As Michael says; “It is forgiveness that undoes persecutors; forgiveness alone has the power to break the spell of victimage. Forgiveness, healing, casting out spirits are all reconciliatory in character; they re-member us (put us back together) to ourselves, to one another and to God.”

Raymond Schwager in Must There Be Scapegoats explains, “The real cause of the division is not in Jesus. But his coming uncovers the deep seated tensions already present and thus provokes open enmities. (Think of segregation in the south) He seems like a sword and a troublemaker because he un.masks as delusionary the familiar forms of human harmony.” The ultimate effect of the coming of Christ is reconciliation to God and enduring peace; but the immediate effect is often strife. Preaching gospel catalyzes cultural breakdown when culture is built on the back of a victim.

Some of the troubling “bits” make sense when viewed as help for Jesus-followers: “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.” I always thought the point of this is to fear God who can send you to hell and not those who can just kill you. I think I was wrong. Now I think the one to fear, the one who destroys both soul and body in hell is “the satan”. “The satan”, the mechanism of violence and war is the reality that destroys soul and body and puts people in hell. If we’re having trouble seeing this, consider life in western Iraq at this moment. “The satan” has made life hell there. Fear “the satan”.

But don’t fear your Father who is so different from “the satan” that he notices the falling of even one sparrow. By contrast “the satan” directly causes the falling of millions of people and God knows how many sparrows. “And you are of more value than many sparrows.” Embrace your Father so that his peace can fill you and eventually stop the madness.

Finally, remember one truth that can pull you out of rivalry and protect you from joining the world’s strife:

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.

Lose your life for the sake of Jesus and the world and find it. Do it for your children and grandchildren. Amen.