

Year A, 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7

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Matthew 10:24-39

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Finding Our Lives

In 2014, three years ago, I wrote a sermon on this text entitled “Troubling Bits.” At that time I could see pieces but I couldn’t clearly see how they belonged together. This year I want to try again.

The disciples have just returned from their experimental foray into the world and it hadn’t gone well. Maybe their expectations are out of adjustment. In the text we are exploring Jesus explains what following him will be like.

He begins with a story-image. “If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, it’s certain that they will call the members of his household by even worse names.” Jesus in this story is the head of the house and his critics call him the chief devil; do his followers expect anything different? It’s enough for disciples to be like their teacher and slaves like their master. They shouldn’t expect any more.

They don’t want to be called names. They don’t want to be brought up on fabricated charges. Why would they sign up for that? The answer seems to be “because disciples aren’t greater than their teacher.” They will accuse Jesus and what will he do; he will use the false charges to reveal what had always been hidden. The secret their accusation conceals will be brought into the open. The same will happen with his disciples.

When people falsely accuse they show their hearts. People see the evil that runs them. Their accusation and the disciples’ innocence become part of the ongoing revelation that Jesus is seeding in the world. His disciples don’t need to be afraid because when they are accused, they know they are being faithful to their master and joining him in uncovering the sin that has run humankind from the beginning.

The accusation is the sin. This sin is being exposed. His disciples, no matter what generation, participate with him in exposing it. All the ways humans manipulate, deceive, blame, and throw others “under the bus” are being exposed. The cross is the great revealer of human folly and the resurrection reveals the innocence of all those who have been accused and condemned.

In Matthew’s text Jesus speaks before the crucifixion and so it is still dark but we live after the crucifixion and so proclaim what Jesus has revealed. Jesus is the light of the world and he has illumined all the accusers who condemn those God loves. In the crucifixion Jesus revealed the

pointing finger. He asks his disciples to join him in doing the same. He said “What you hear whispered in the halls of power; secrets that oppress, schemes that deceive, lies that enslave, and plans that inevitably sacrifice others, announce from the rooftop. In doing that you are being a faithful disciple. Subvert the story meant to blame and cast out. Don’t allow truth to be hidden; reveal it!

Now we are ready for the next mind-blowing bit. “Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body but can’t kill the soul. Instead, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell.” Who is “this one”? It’s not God! There is another culprit here. God is our lover and not our accuser.

The culprit is the satanic mechanism itself; Satan, the accusing finger personified. This is the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. The accuser starts wars, conflicts, altercations and then uses violence to stop them. Any stray bullet from any side can destroy the body. The accuser can also tempt us into accusing too, imitating everyone else, and when we do that we lose our essential humanity. Our accusing makes hell on earth and everyone around gets caught in the cross fire. In this hell of our own making we lose our bodies and our souls as our essential humanity ebbs away.

Beginning with verse 29 the feel of what Jesus is saying seems to change. Suddenly we are talking about two sparrows, sold for a penny, that are so important to the Father that he knows instantly if one of them falls. Jesus then adds, “Don’t be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.” If we knew how deeply our Father loves us, there would be no need to accuse. Human accusation is driven by fear; the fear that we are not good enough, that others are better and will replace us, and that we may be cast out or left behind. The fear drives us into the arms of the devil and we too accuse.

If we only knew how much we are loved by our Father. His love is not generalized and abstract; it is intimate, particular and specific. “Even the hairs of your head are all counted.”

In this ongoing rush of insight Jesus next says “Therefore, everyone who acknowledges me before people, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven. But everyone who denies me before people, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” I think this can be paraphrased as “If we acknowledge Jesus as our teacher, leader and revealer of God’s truth, Jesus will acknowledge us as one of his with his Father who exists outside the vortex of human rivalry. Then we will be in the process of giving up rivalry and learning to love as God does. If we don’t acknowledge Jesus then we humans simply continue on the path we are on and it will take us where it will.

Now we come to the verse we have all been bracing for. “Don’t think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth. I haven’t come to bring peace but a sword.” Jesus’ division-revealing

presence in the world will divide all institutions including the family and whether we lose our life or gain it will depend on which side of that divide we place ourselves.

David Cayley, the producer of the Canadian Broadcasting Company's "Ideas" series explains this best. He interviewed Rene Girard and they talked about this passage from Matthew. I would like to read an excerpt from that conversation.

David Cayley starts:

In the New Testament, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. It is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword. For I have come to set son against father, daughter against mother... A person's enemies will be the members of his own household." The passage is puzzling. Why would Jesus' gospel of love and mutual forbearance create division and discord? René Girard's interpretation unlocks the puzzle. Human society, Girard says, creates order by channeling violence towards scapegoats. Envy and resentment are directed away from one another and towards a common enemy. Ritual sacrifices institutionalize this way of expelling violence. Jesus denounces the lie on which this system rests and allows himself to be crucified in order to reveal for all time the innocence of all sacrificial victims. But this revelation, by depriving people of the means to disown their violence and project it onto others, inevitably brings that violence home to roost, so to speak, setting father against son and so forth. Jesus flushes the hidden violence of culture into the open, imposing a choice on people, and it is this choice, Girard says, that constitutes the unveiling or uncovering that Christians call the Apocalypse. (The great revealing that we must decide about and our decision will determine whether we live as a species or die.)

René Girard replies:

The Apocalypse is not some invention. If we are without sacrifices, either we're going to love each other or we're going to die. We have no more protection against our own violence. Therefore, we are confronted with a choice: either we're going to follow the rules of the Kingdom of God or the situation is going to get infinitely worse.

The rules of the kingdom of God are to love like God loves. It's a love for all that excludes no one. This love always wants what is best for the other and for all. Because it renounces all violence, it depends on forgiveness, humility, compassion, suffering and mercy to spread itself. We have been invited into this kingdom. To accept the invitation is to find our lives. Amen.