

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: June 25, 2023

Genesis 21:8-21

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

The Rev. Nat Johnson

Once again, we find ourselves in the middle of what scholars call Jesus' "Missionary Discourse." Last week we read about Jesus commissioning the disciples for public ministry. Like Jesus, the disciples would be sent to preach the good news of God's present reign. They would be sent to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, and raise the dead. Today, Jesus continues to prepare the disciples for what they will face as they imitate Jesus and his ministry of reconciliation and healing. The power of the Gospel will inevitably confront the power of the elite. It will challenge their dominance by subverting the status quo. When the Gospel is truly lived and embodied by the disciples, they will experience the same kind of hostility that Jesus experienced, and so, like Jesus, they must also take up their cross in order to follow him.

These are difficult sayings for us, today. We want Jesus to be nice, peaceable, and friendly. Jesus tells us that he has not come to bring peace but a sword, and that his presence and the truth he came to embody would be a point of division rather than unity. The dividing line would fissure in even the most basic relational units – the family. It's important to note that Jesus is not *prescribing* the suffering and turmoil he warns his disciples about. Rather, Jesus' words are descriptive, matter of fact.

If the world has received me in such hostile ways, he says, you should expect the same kind of reception. Not all will be glad to hear the good news of God's reign, Jesus tells them. Those whose power, security, and dominance rely on the world staying as it is will be confronted and challenged and they will perceive your power as a threat.

To our contemporary ears, it's hard to see past the dire warnings and difficult sayings. But it's significant that even in the face of these warnings, Jesus reminds them also that the God who holds the power of life and death, is an incredibly tender God who holds the lives of sparrows in divine love and who knows the number of hairs on each of our heads. They can face the challenges ahead not because they have the grit to get through it but because God holds them in a tender embrace and knows them more intimately than even their closest family members.

It has been hard not to think about Seattle Pride this week as I've been studying and reflecting. How many of our LGBTQIA+ siblings have experienced familial rejection – both in the home and in the Church. Though we live in a place where those of us who identify as queer are generally "accepted" and where our safety is often taken for granted, we still face discrimination and violence. It can be easy in a place like Seattle to assume that these kinds of things don't happen in our community. Just like any other kind of discrimination, privilege can tend to blind us to the reality of those whose experiences are unlike our own. A week to the day after my wife and I got married, in 2016, we were assaulted on a bus in Seattle just for holding hands. Even here, in this liberal pocket of the world, we still face familial rejection. We still experience all of the microaggressions that leave us feeling unseen, invalid, and denied our full selves. And, passages like the one we read today from Matthew have been used to justify the division that happens in families and communities when an individual comes out.

This morning, I want to explicitly state that if you have experienced this kind of rejection, if you have been told that part of who you are is an abomination, if you have had to weather the “death by a thousand cuts” in the daily microaggressions that erase who you are... God has not and will not leave you. God knows you intimately, cares for you, and will walk with you in the way of the cross. Jesus did not promise his disciples that they would experience the world without conflict, but he did promise his presence and divine mercy and compassion. Today, I want to remind you that God knows the number of hairs on your head and that you are loved and held in a tender embrace.

To follow Jesus is to walk in the way of the cross. Discipleship requires our participation. We cannot be a disciple of Christ only by association. We are called to do what Jesus did, to teach what Jesus taught, and we are to expect the challenges that Jesus faced. To be clear, we are not called to create conflict for conflict’s sake. Jesus is not telling his disciples to go out and cause division (though, I would argue that we *are* called to raise some holy trouble!). Rather, he explains that the good news of the gospel does not always seem like good news to those who benefit from keeping liberating love of God at bay. To those who benefit from power structures and policies that protect privilege and security, the good news of the gospel creates conflict.

It is not hard to see this playing out in our social and political landscape today: those whose power and safety and security rest on the oppression and disempowerment of others feel threatened when that power, safety, and security is exposed as nothing more than a façade. In their grasp to maintain their power, Jesus tells us, they will ultimately lose their life by trying to protect it. But for those who square their allegiance with God and with God’s purposes, they will find life abundant! In his book, *Matthew and the Margins*, Warren Carter says this:

“To find life in the subversive way of the cross is to find it in an act that refuses to give the elite the power of intimidation and conformity which it craves. To find life is to enter into the fullness of God’s purposes in the new age.”

In Jesus, God inaugurates a new age, an age that is unfolding and becoming even as the “old age,” little by little, is fading. It is not yet an age of peace, because for true peace to exist, we must find our way into the life of justice. We must follow Jesus in the way of the cross, standing as tangible signs in the world of God’s grace and power and care.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus reminds us. “The world cannot destroy you.” Today, dear people of Grace, let us cast off our fear in the light of Christ’s presence and let us follow him into the fullness of God’s purposes and the abundance of God’s life. **Amen.**