

Pentecost 3A (6/25/17)

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Psalm 69:7-18

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus has come to comfort the afflicted, and Jesus has come to afflict the comfortable. The reign of God does not yield to other allegiances, but demands an unwavering commitment from disciples. This commitment will invariably affect relationships, even rupturing some, as competing priorities resist Jesus' priorities for our life together.

I wonder if the disciples ever thought they ought to screen Jesus' teachings. Upon hearing a pronouncement like the one in our Gospel from Matthew today, they must have panicked a little:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the Earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Let's just say it's not particularly good PR. So, I wonder if the disciples felt the need to soften the message. *Don't worry*, they might have whispered to each other, *he's probably just feeling especially dramatic today. Let's just keep this one to ourselves, shall we?* [nervous laughter] *Rabbi, you don't really mean that though, do you? Quick, say something nice about love.* In any case, someone eventually told Matthew and Luke, and Jesus' troubling words were forever enshrined in Holy Scripture.

And truthfully, I'm glad they were. The Gospels bear witness to the depth of Jesus' love, the divine compassion he showers on the crowds who are

“harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”¹ **We know the full extent of his grace and mercy, so we know that he has come to comfort the afflicted. But a teaching like the one in our Gospel today reminds us that Jesus has also come to afflict the comfortable. As soon as we stop noticing the radical challenge at the heart of the gospel – as soon as we stop being affected by it – we’ve stopped listening.**

*What does Jesus have against family? we might wonder. Why does he insist on breaking us up? Of course, Jesus understands the treasure that family can be. One of his most famous parables portrays God as a gracious father who lavishes his prodigal son with unmerited love upon his long-awaited return.² I can’t think of a more beautiful depiction of family than that. No, **Jesus does not will dysfunction in families. Rather, he claims that discipleship will rearrange our priorities according to the reign of God,³ and thereby impact our other loyalties.***

Will Willimon tells the story of a memorable encounter he had while serving as Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. Near the end of one academic year, he received an angry phone call from the father of a graduating senior who had been active in campus ministry. She had recently declined a job offer from a respected engineering firm to pursue a call to work on a clean water project in Haiti. And, her father blamed Willimon. *If she hadn’t been so*

¹ Matthew 9:36.

² Luke 15:11-32

³ See William Goettler, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 168.

involved in campus ministry, he contended, she would never have entertained such a crazy idea. Willimon responded to the man's tirade by reminding him that, in fact, *he*, and not Willimon, had introduced his daughter to Jesus, *he* had brought her to church Sunday after Sunday to hear the sacred stories, and so *he* had exposed her to God's radical, risky love for the world. Speechless for a moment, the father finally confessed, "But, we just wanted her to be a Presbyterian."⁴

The young woman in the story understood something of Jesus' proclamation in today's Gospel. **Discipleship is not a secondary call; it's not intended to sit neatly alongside our other priorities – priorities like financial security, social status, and, yes, family expectations. Jesus insists that the reign of God does not yield to other allegiances, but demands an unwavering commitment from disciples. And this commitment is liable to affect relationships, even rupturing some.** Want to tell the truth about Jesus' vision for our life together? "Anticipate being unfriended. Unfollowed. Tried and trolled," writes Karoline Lewis.⁵

Lance Pape elaborates on the nature of discipleship according to Jesus' challenge: What does it mean for the "the disciple to be like the teacher"?

[Excerpt from *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 165-7]

⁴ Terry Brandt, on the occasion of my installation at Sharon Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, North Dakota, September 8th, 2013.

⁵ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4927>.

Discipleship means rubbing people the wrong way for the right reasons. When the poor are blessed, when grace mitigates old animosities, when justice seekers insist on meddling in the affairs of the state, someone is bound to get upset. Following Jesus is costly.

The promise that accompanies the cost, however, is that every hair on our heads is counted. God has made a comprehensive claim on our lives regardless of circumstance. Joy and suffering, doubt and confidence, life and death, God's embrace is all-encompassing. So, we don't have to be afraid to risk everything for Jesus' sake.

Dear church, when Jesus brings our highest priorities into focus, competing priorities will resist. Relationships will be strained, and sacrifices will be inevitable. **But “strive first for the reign of God,”⁶ he urges, and let go of the desire to control the outcome. After all, God is able to heal and sustain all things in the end.** To borrow the words of William Goettler, “The gospel shakes up [our] values... and reorients [our] goals,” but ultimately, our “individual lives, family structures, and the whole of society will thrive when the gospel's good news is heard and embraced.”⁷

⁶ Matthew 6:33.

⁷ *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 168, 166.