

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

June 25, 2023

Fearless Troublemaking

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master.” These words might sound like an axiom, perhaps a teaching about humility or hierarchy, but they are not...these are words of stark warning. Jesus is making it clear to his disciples that following his Way will likely lead to the same place that he is headed...to conflict...to the cross...to death. And frankly, this should come as no great surprise. As Jesus rightly reflects elsewhere in Matthew, “For this reason I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify”¹ and again, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”² Prophets, those who speak truth to power, are rarely welcomed by those who wield that power.

But it's not just conflict with those in power or with systems! Following the Way, Jesus warns, will also lead to conflict and division within your community and even within your families. The prophet Jeremiah experienced this, lamenting in our First Testament reading today, “I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.”³ There are similar sentiments expressed by many of the other prophets of old to, who were persecuted by those in power as well as their communities.⁴ Essentially what Jesus is saying in those opening words is that his followers need to be ready to experience conflict for trying to follow his Way. Conflict of all sorts and from all sides. What cheery news, right?

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. He knows that such a warning will likely lead to fear and fear damages faith...heck, fear damages most everything good in

¹ Matthew 25:34a (NRSVUE)

² Matthew 25:37a

³ Jeremiah 20:7c

⁴ C.f. 1 Kings 22:24; 2 Kings 2:23; 2 Chronicles 24:21; Amos 2:12, 7:13; Micah 2:6

the world! And so Jesus continues with three reasons we need not fear the conflict that will arise when walking the Way:

First, Jesus promises that his followers need never fear the light. The forces of evil fear the light and seek the darkness to hide their evil deeds, obfuscating and excusing away the truth of the world's brokenness. You can see this at work when people in power hide behind opaque legal systems. Systems that lead to massive amounts of incarceration for the poor and minorities while the wealthy are often released after paying a fine or doing community service for the same crime that lands the poor in prison.⁵

It's no wonder the forces of evil prefer the dark. But followers of the Way need not fear the light. And we are called to be spreaders of the light. Reflecting the glory (and justice) of God into all corners of the world. Asking tough questions about the brokenness of our systems. Questions that will make people defensive and upset, even people we know and love.

Second, Jesus explains that his followers need not fear the destruction of the body. Paul picks up on this in his writing to the church in Rome: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."⁶ These words were particularly important for the church in Rome who will experience some of the worst persecution of Christians in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. What freeing news this can be! God holds our souls and claims us for eternity. We can therefore be bold in challenging the powers that be since their greatest power...death...holds no sway over followers of the Way.

Thirdly and finally, Jesus teaches that we need not fear because knows us and is with us. God is so intimately knowledgeable of you that every hair on your head is accounted for! The God who pieced together the universe knows every fiber of your being and is with you always. With that knowledge any sort of fear can be overcome.

These are important teachings! Fear not only gets in the way of the Way. It also can cause us to damage others and the world around us. While this particular teaching addresses fear of the conflict that will arise from following the Way; it is also helpful in terms of fighting our fears more generally. And we need that help since fearful people tend to be violent and angry people or

⁵ <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/rich-get-richer-and-poor-get-prison-ideology-class-and-criminal>

⁶ Romans 6:5

deceptive and anxious people. Fear harms humanity and creation in a variety of ways. It is one of the worst motivators humanity has. No wonder one of the most consistent themes in scripture is “be not afraid!”

After these lessons on why followers need not fear, Jesus reiterates the cost of following his Way. He does not want his disciples to be surprised at the response they will get when following his Way. Just last Sunday we heard Jesus admonish his disciples to be “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”⁷ Follow the Way of Christ with your eyes wide open to the forces that will oppose you. Treat people kindly and with love, but do not expect to always receive that in return, especially when speaking the truth about the brokenness of the world and the call for justice and mercy that comes from God. The Way of Christ is a Way of fearless troublemaking as we seek to help bring about the kingdom of heaven in the here-and-now.

Jesus sums all of this up in the final verse of our Gospel reading today: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”⁸ The hoarding of life is evil. Living in such a way that your desires are taken care of while the basic necessities of life and beyond the means of so many is evil. Setting up systems that allow for small groups to hoard massive amounts of resources while others starve is evil. Yet any of those systems and powers will argue that they are simply preserving their own life...they are seeking their life and the consequence of that is that they will ultimately lose it. Why? Mostly because they do not understand what life is.

But those who give their life away for the sake of Jesus...which is simply another way of saying those who prioritize following the Way of Christ, will gain life. Mostly because following the Way is what life is actually about! The forces of evil, and those who serve them, will always be missing life...true life. For true life is found not in hoarding it, but in giving it away for the sake of others and for the sake of God.

I’ve got my new Ubuntu t-shirt on under my clerical this morning, thanks again for that wonderful gift! Ubuntu, which you may remember is an African philosophy that can be summed up as “I am because we are.” Following the Way of Christ means centering connection and community. Giving our lives away for the sake of our neighbors, our communities, and most especially for the sake of the outcast and the stranger, the sick and imprisoned, the

⁷ Matthew 10:16b

⁸ Matthew 10:39

oppressed and the dying. Doing this leads to life! Because life isn't about accumulating or hoarding...it isn't about competing or out doing others...it's about relationships!

So fear not, fellow followers of the Way. And be bold in giving your life away. Give it away by reflecting the light of God's justice into the dark corners of the world. Give it away by speaking truth to power and calling for change. Give it away by stirring up trouble and not shying away for the conflict that following the Way will lead to! Give your life away since you know God is with you always...the **source** of ALL LIFE IS WITH YOU ALWAYS AS YOU GIVE YOUR LIFE AWAY! How amazing is that? How eternal is the life we have to give away! Amen.