

Defining “Disciple”
Matthew 10:24-39
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There are times when it seems that Jesus is being very clear about his teachings or his expectations. I think of things like, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which may not be easy, but is pretty simple. Then there are times like these when if we’re paying attention our response pretty much has to be, “What?!” First of all, on the surface it seems like a bunch of random phrases strung together. Second of all, Jesus, who is our loving, pacifist teacher who tells his followers how to peacefully overthrow the Roman Empire, says, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” Third of all, the man who some percentage of our population sees as the herald of family values, seemingly expects his followers to tear apart their families. And that’s only three of the things that are a little strange about this passage. Although, if we’re honest, it’s a little strange for the Son of God to show up in the first place, perform miracles, teach, die, and then rise of the dead. So maybe this is just par for the course. Well, I’m never one to shy away from a challenge, so when I read this Scripture, I thought, “bring it on!”

I thought it would be easiest to break down the pieces a little bit in this pericope, which is the Greek word for the sections of Scripture we read each week – a “cutting out” from the whole that forms a short passage that’s good for public reading. So the pericope seems to me to be a sort of definition of a disciple. A disciple is someone who:

- Doesn’t try to be Jesus and does try to be like Jesus.
- Isn’t afraid of people who don’t follow Jesus.
- Shares with others what they’ve learned from Jesus.
- Trusts that God knows them and values them.

- Knows that Jesus, who is in full connection with God, will acknowledge them to God since they acknowledge Jesus to others.
- Finds that following Jesus sometimes means that there's a separation between them and those who do not follow Jesus.

Last month I preached about evangelism, about how we have some good news to share and can't be afraid of sharing it. About how we have to stop letting other people define who we are and go out into this world as radical loving and inclusive Christians that we are. I feel like this passage today lets us know that Jesus understands that sometimes we are going to face difficulty when we set out to this task. He says, "what I tell you secret, shout from the rooftops!" Share what you learn from God with others, share your story of relationship with God through Christ. He says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." This is Jesus way of letting us know that our souls are God's territory. This is the place deep inside of us where we are truly ourselves and where we can connect to God on a most intimate level. This place can't be hurt by anyone because it is loved and protected by God.

To me this entire definition of disciple is about risk. We are asked, as Christians, as followers of Jesus, to take a giant risk in our lives. We are asked to be like Jesus. Not to *be* Jesus, mind you; which should also be a giant relief. We are asked to not fear people – to not be afraid of what others will say about you if you acknowledge your faith. We are asked to share out loud what God speaks to us in silent. We are asked to know that God loves us and values us and knows us – knows every hair on our heads, or lack thereof. We are asked to trust that Jesus is on our side. All this sounds good. A risk, yes, but also good. And then we come to that troubling part of the pericope, the part that I'm

refusing to shy away from: We are asked to hear that Jesus comes not to bring peace but a sword and if you're not ready to follow him even if it puts you at odds with your family then you cannot find the life he is offering. Let's just take a second to really absorb the radicalism of that statement.

It seems to me that we are asked to take the risk of acknowledging a side of Jesus that isn't so comfortable and nice. We are all about Jesus' radical love. We are all about Jesus' message of radical inclusiveness – those who are put outside of the kin-dom of the world inherit the kin-dom of God. The poor and oppressed, the prisoner and the outcast, the tax collectors and sinners. The meek, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These people are members of the household of God and are loved deeply and fully by God. Alright! But then, then, we hear that Jesus didn't come to bring peace but to bring a sword.

I find sometimes that preaching is a good place for confession, so let me confess to all of you something the youth already know about me. I was a somewhat rebellious teenager. I certainly wasn't as rebellious as I could have been, but I had my fair share of funky hair dye colors and got a kick out of wearing combat boots and fishnet stockings to school. Not exactly the outfit my parents would have chosen for me. And, in my family, going to church was a rebellion, too. This made it all the more appealing! I began going to church before my rebellious stage really kicked in, but the fact that it was a rebellion made it continue to be appealing during that stage when it came. And this passage from Matthew was like my mantra, permission to go against the wishes of my family and go to church: "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. 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." A holy rebellion. And honestly, it was important to me. Not just Scriptural basis for my continuing disobedience, but it felt like Jesus knew what I would be going through.

Don't get me wrong – I'm not saying that the meaning of today's pericope is that you now have a couple verses to point to when you're in the middle of family conflict. For me, however, I felt better knowing that Jesus knew sometimes he would come between people and their families. And I trusted that if I just did what I felt God was asking me to do, it would all work out. Last weekend, at my ordination, I looked out from the stage and saw my whole family – mom, dad, two brothers, and my sister. Some of them were certainly uncomfortable with what I was doing, but they were there, supportive, and loving me. So I figure Jesus knows what he's talking about after all.

This statement about Jesus bringing a sword and not peace, is not to be taken literally. In Luke's version of the Gospel, Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Despite what the Crusades would have us believe, Jesus does not intend for us to enter the world yielding a sword and bringing peace through violence. Instead, Jesus expects that because the message he brings is radical, there will be conflict and division and even a cross, when the kingdom of God shows up. Jesus himself has experiences of this. The people of his hometown run him out, some of the leaders of his religion who stand to lose from what he is bringing question his motives and his abilities, he is separated from his own mother and siblings as he teaches. After all, Jesus doesn't come to solidify the social order, but to challenge. Not to maintain our understanding of family but to open up the term family to include

everyone. Jesus brings the peace of the kin-dom of God, which is at odds with the oppressive peace of the Roman Empire. But this peace does not come through compromise or secrecy or evasion.

Jesus meets the powers of this world head on. He is strong and radical in calling out the oppression that he sees. He comes to show the people what's really going on. He's a truth-teller. This is radical, too. A different and edgier radicalism from the radical love and inclusion we focus on a lot. This is uncomfortable and it creates some disorder and maybe some chaos. It shakes things up. Jesus' message here is the radical peace of the kin-dom of God. This is a peace that may cause division even in our own families.

What Jesus offers, though, is participation in this amazing kin-dom of God that enables everyone to live as God created us to live. Total peace, justice, equality, love, and honor. A whole fallen earth restored. A beauty we can only imagine. In order to find this life, we all must lose what is keeping us from it. Out of loss comes growth. Out of losing our attachment to the kingdom of the world through Christ, we can become completely attached to the Source of all our being and find new, abundant life there.

In the words of Forrest Gump, that's all I have to say about that.

But, since this is my last sermon here at SPSA, I do have some other things I want to say. Thank you. For being so easy to love and so joyful to serve God with. The past 6 years have been challenging and wonderful. I've loved getting to know you and pray with you and struggle with you. I love that I met my husband and celebrated my wedding. I have appreciated all the moments spent with you, the silly ones, the fun ones, the hard ones. Thank you for being a community of Christians striving to do what's right by God

in this world. Thank you for all the lessons you've taught me and for learning some of my lessons, too. Anne Lamott, who is an writer and a real person with real struggles who talks about God in a real way (something I very much admire), writes, "When things break up and fences fall over, desperation and powerlessness slink in, which turns out to be good: humility and sweetness often arrive in your garden not long after...Seeds sank into the ground, and who could even guess what might grow? Hey! We all like surprises, don't we?" (page 6, *Grace (Eventually)*) So although I'm moving on, and sometimes it feels like some things are breaking up or falling over, who can even guess what might grow from here? In all of us. Hey! We all like surprises, don't we? I'm certain that the surprises God has in store for us will be beautiful. And while I'm quoting movie characters I have two more to leave with you:

As Tiny Tim says, "God bless us, everyone."

And as Bill & Ted say, "Be excellent to each other. And party on."