

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time/June 22, 2014

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matthew 10:24-39;

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"A Disciple"

In this season after Pentecost, the major theme that we hear each year at this time is "discipleship." A disciple is a learner, a student. Someone who follows and is guided by a teacher. I invite you this morning to think about what it means to be a student, a learner, a disciple of Christ.

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus talks to his disciples about what it means to be a disciple. Unfortunately, some of the strongest lines in this passage are often misunderstood.

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Some might pull that line out of context and suggest that Jesus is advocating violence or war. This is not the case. Jesus was a teacher of non-violence. His whole life exemplified non-violence in a time and culture when violence was the norm. No, Matthew uses the term "sword" as a metaphor. If we look at the same passage in Luke, we get it much more to the point. *"Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division."* (Lk. 12:51). Luke states it more plainly, *"division."*

Remember, this passage is about discipleship. The beginning of this chapter is where Jesus calls the 12 disciples and gives them authority over unclean spirits and the ability to heal. They are named here, all 12, and called apostles. In Greek it is *apostolos*, means "messenger" or "envoy." It means "one who is sent." And it is here that Jesus sends them out to the villages and towns, to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. Sounds a bit familiar? Sounds just like what Jesus was doing. *"A disciple is not above his teacher . . . it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher."* (10:24).

And then there are these verses about family members being set against one another. Homes are divided. Jesus says, *"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 a man's foes will be those of his own household."* (10:35-36). What happened to "Honor your father and your mother?"

So why all this stuff about division and what does *"division"* have to do with discipleship? Jesus is preparing his disciples, his students to go out and to begin taking on the ministry that he has been doing. He is preparing them to be apostles, messengers, envoys to the people Israel.

It almost seems that Jesus is saying that this message he is giving them, may indeed be for the purpose of dividing some from others. In fact, at the end of this gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a parable of the Great Judgment (*Matt. 25:31-46*), where the Son of Humanity comes and separates the people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, the good from the bad. He tells those who did the will of God, who aided those in need, that *"as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."* (*Matt. 25:40*). Clearly, there is this sense of dividing some from others within Jesus' overall message.

We hear that same thing in those words about setting family members against one another. Is it possible that this is what Jesus intends? Is the purpose of the gospel to separate and divide families, and friends, and to tear communities apart?

There are two contextual things going on here. First, the context of Jesus with his disciples. Jesus is sending out his disciples for the first time. He is warning them that it will not be easy. That the message of God's realm that they are carrying out with them may not be accepted by all. In fact, it

is a message that some may hear and accept quite readily but it is also a message that some may find very unsettling and that there is great risk in what they are doing, that indeed it may at times be like going to battle. So these words are a warning. Yet he is telling them not to be afraid. It's as if he is saying, *"Hey, God cares for even the little sparrows, so if you are doing God's will, don't you think God will take even greater care of you?"* There is comfort even amidst the warning.

The other context we need to be thinking of is that of the author, Matthew and his audience, the community of faith that he is writing to. Most likely a predominantly Jewish-Christian gathering, who would have already been experiencing division within their local synagogues and the Jerusalem Temple, where by the late 60s of the first century, the Christians would have been undergoing harsh persecution and were being kicked out of their Jewish religious places of worship. They would also have been experiencing division within their own households because of this new religion, this new faith practice oriented around a traveling preacher who had been crucified by the Romans but proclaimed as alive by his followers.

Matthew's description of Jesus warning his disciples about the potential for conflict, hostility and division would be something that Matthew's own congregation would very likely have known first hand and these words coming from Jesus might actually be words that they would find comforting, reassuring. For if Jesus' own disciples had to experience these things, then perhaps they too could endure them, could continue to proclaim Christ's gospel even amidst persecution and estrangement from their own families and religious communities.

So I don't believe that the intention is to bring division or discord or conflict wherever we go as Christ's messengers. No, it is just the opposite. Jesus overall message was indeed one of bringing people together, of mending the rifts, of repairing the breach. His was a message of reconciliation between brothers who were estranged. A message of creating bonds of love and compassion between those considered enemies or rivals. At the core, it is a message of unity, of bringing people together.

But have you ever tried to be a disciple, the one who brings people together? The gospel of Christ requires us to be vulnerable with one another. It requires us to admit our faults, to seek forgiveness, and to give it, to pursue reconciliation with one another. That means we have to let go of our strong egos and be willing to let go of our own agendas, our own needs and desires, our need to be in control of things. And that can be extremely difficult for some of us. So much so that we would rather separate ourselves from each other than follow that way. And that's what Jesus is saying here. God's realm is built upon love, compassion and reconciliation and if one cannot abide by these things then one must by definition, separate/divide oneself outside of that realm.

You see, being the church is not simply about being nice and friendly and welcoming, as nice as those things are. It is not just about keeping the church going, baking pies and doing all kinds of fund raisers, as important as that is. The church is about sharing the whole gospel of Christ, the tough stuff as well as the easy stuff. It is about calling one another to accountability and being responsible for our own actions, being ready at all times to reach out and reconnect whenever the bonds of love between us and others have been strained. It is about taking risks and putting ourselves in places where division exists, where injustice reigns, and seeking instead to bring in God's realm. It is about **making disciples of Christ**.

So, we have to ask ourselves the same question that Matthew was raising to his own community. Are you willing to suffer the possibility of division from those you know and love and associate with? Are you willing to demand that truth and justice and right and compassion prevail? Are you willing to be a student of Christ's gospel, a learner of Jesus' teachings, even the hard and difficult parts? Are you ready to be a **disciple** of Christ?
Amen.