

God's Call Is Complicated
Third Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Matthew 10:24-29
Welborne UMC ~ June 25, 2017
F. Elizabeth Givens

I have to confess to you this morning that if you were to walk up to me most days of the week and say, Pastor Beth, what's the most confusing part of the Bible, I would say to you, Paul. Figuring out Paul's grammar and logic takes a lot of focus and a lot of work.

But this week, I'd have to say Jesus is pretty up to the Pauline standard of confusing. He can get that way, especially when he is in the middle of long talks with his disciples. This one of those long talks, and we need to go back to the beginning to set a little context.

Last week we began looking at these chapters in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is giving some instructions to his new disciples. He tells them that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few, and that this discipleship game is hard work. Then, he sends them out in pairs through all the towns and villages, telling them, "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'^[c] ⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers,^[d] cast out demons. (Matthew 10:7)." In other words, he again sends them out into the harvest to do some hard work. He continues that theme in our scripture today. The words of verses 26-28 that were read a few moments ago said this:

²⁶ "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.^[a]

Do not be afraid—as I said to someone this week who was facing some tough stuff, this is one of the most common phrases in scripture. But in this instance, Jesus says, have no fear of THEM. Who is them? What is he talking about with uncovering and darkness and whispers. It was helpful to me to turn to Eugene Peterson's The Message version of the Bible to wrap my mind—and my heart—around this a bit more. Let me ask you to read with me Peterson's translation of these three verses, as they are projected on your screens.

²⁶⁻²⁷ "Don't be intimidated.

Eventually everything is going to be out in the open,

and everyone will know how things really are.

So don't hesitate to go public now.

²⁸ "Don't be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies.

There's nothing they can do to your soul, your core being.

Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life—body and soul—in his hands.

Those were words that made some sense to me. They made sense because the “them” is clearly bullies and intimidators, and I have known my share of bullies and intimidators in my lifetime. I bet you have, too. And I have also known that while the people themselves who act that way are beloved children of God, the actions of bullying and intimidating are actions of the presence of evil in our world. They are, in Jesus’ words, the actions of the powers of darkness at work in the world. And we are to have no fear of them, because they cannot harm our core being. It is God who hold our lives, our entire lives—in his hands.

So what Jesus was saying to his disciples was, when you go out to do my work, there are going to be people who try to bully and intimidate you. Don’t let them. Share my good news now, don’t hold any of it back.

Are there any times you have wanted to hold back sharing the good news or acting as Jesus in the world because you were a little intimidated or worried about being bullied if you went out on a limb? Are there any times you have not lived as a disciple because you were afraid of what others might think of you, or afraid of what might happen to you? I can remember this being a narrative of some congregations back in the time when CARITAS was being formed. CARITAS is a ministry in Richmond that, since the 1980’s, has housed the homeless in area congregations. I can remember myself, and have heard the narrative in other congregations, fears about letting the homeless into our churches. That was particularly highlighted in that time frame by the AIDS epidemic. The fear of spreading disease almost won out over the clear Gospel command to provide housing for our neighbors. Thank heavens it didn’t—amen?

Stanley Saunders, writing about this text, says that there isn’t a more “pervasive or powerful emotion in the world than fear.” And Jesus knew that. He knew that “faithful proclamation and practice of the gospel inevitably puts disciples on a collision course with the powers of this world.”¹ We certainly see that in today, as the message of Jesus in Matthew 25 and many other places clearly calls us to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned. Jesus calls us to tear down walls, and our culture persists in building them up.

The question it seems to me, and this gets back to the title of this sermon, God’s call is complicated, the question is, when we are clear about how God calls us to live, and about the choices Jesus invites us to make to be his disciple, then how, friends, do we deal with those who stir up in us an attitude of fear? We’ve got our examples out there in our culture of heroes and heroines who have stood up to the powers of darkness: Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, Wonder Woman, a man named Jesus.

But what about us?

Well, I go back to these words of scripture when I am afraid. Don’t be intimidated. Don’t be bluffed into silence. Everything that is hidden will be out in the open. There’s nothing they can do to your soul, your core being.

When I am afraid and I sit with those words, my attitude toward the people and the institutions and the situations that I fear shifts. Why don’t you try it with me? Think of

¹ Stanley Saunders, “Commentary on Matthew 10:24-39,” www.workingprecher.com, June 22, 2014.

someone or something that threatens you, or intimidates you, or makes you afraid. Hold it in your mind.

Now ask yourselves this question: is this threat, intimidation, or fear, is it of God? If it is a person you are thinking of—what has grabbed hold of their soul to make them act this way? What is going on in their heart and life to create this force of darkness? If it is a situation or an institution, was it an act of God that created it? Or something acting against God?

Darkness cannot resist the power of God's light. It can, sometimes, overshadow it. But it will not ultimately overcome it. That, friends, is the story of our faith, the story of the empty tomb. That, friends, is what Jesus wants us to remember as we practice our discipleship. We may be called to some complicated and challenging things. But we must always have the courage to act as those who follow Jesus, for there is nothing we fear when God holds our lives in his hands.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.