

The Demands of Discipleship

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Matthew 10: 24-39

There are things Jesus said that I wish he hadn't said, and there are things Jesus did that I wish he hadn't done. I don't want to project, but you might feel the same way. Not that they were, or are, wrong, or that I fundamentally disagree with his words or actions. They're not; I don't. It is that they are so right, so true and spot-on, either about me, or the world, or the church.

The problem is with me, and not Jesus, of course. And I wouldn't want it any other way. I want faith to matter. I want faith to change me, transform me. I want to make a difference in the world because of following this Jesus. I just know I don't, always. I fall short. I know that. He knows that about me. And that's why there are things Jesus said that I wish he hadn't said, and there are things Jesus did that I wish he hadn't done. Nonetheless, he said and did, *and* nonetheless, I will aspire to follow, and, again, not meaning to project, perhaps you are in the same boat with me.

It has been an intense month, June 2020, and it's not done yet. Crises of all kinds; we know the litany. Medical, economic, social, which is also political and moral – with the murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks and protests and debates about policing and race and racism this two days after Juneteenth. Marilynne Robinson asked “What Kind of Country Do We Want?” and it feels as if we are having that discussion in real time.

It is also Pride Month. Fifty-one years ago, the Stonewall riots happened in Greenwich Village, as members of the LGBTQ community faced off with New York City police. Fifty years ago, June 1970, the first Pride parade was held, and virtual parades are being held this month to commemorate. I bring Pride up because it matters on its own. This congregation historically supported the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, an advocacy group working for ordination equality and then marriage equality in the Presbyterian Church, while also working to maintain connections across the spectrum of the church through the change. I helped to found the Covenant Network, for which I am very grateful and sometimes a little proud.

Ten years ago, 2010, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) changed its mind on ordination. Five years ago it changed its mind on marriage. I believe the church, and the world in some small way, are the better for it.

I bring those moments up because they matter. It's important to remember. But I also bring them up in the context of my observation from the outset, the difficulty of things that Jesus said or did that cause, now some 2000 years later, *agita*, discomfort, stress, sleepless nights, and more. And they should.

In the ordination debates, and to a lesser extent in the marriage debates, I expended time and energy debating, literally. Both as a Covenant Network leader and a member of the denomination's Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, I would fly, drive, conference call (there was no Zoom yet!) with people who agreed with me and equally as important, people who didn't. I presented in presbyteries and conferences and congregations. Sometimes I was warmly received; sometimes not so much – both by those to the left of me

and those to the right, if you can envision a spectrum. I was called a heretic (that was fun). I was called a wretched compromiser, giving away either too much or not enough. All the while I held on to what I believed, seeking to respect and listen to all. When the time came to vote, I would vote my conscience, humbly, prayerfully, hoping that what I was doing represented my faith in an authentic way, and knowing full well that I, as much as any one, was prone to error or timidity and every other human shortcoming.

And still...those words of Jesus, and those actions. It is ordinary time in the seasons of the church and it is ministry time for Jesus as we find ourselves in the gospel of Matthew. He has called his apostles and has told them their work won't be easy. They might want to keep their LinkedIn profile updated. We land in the middle of a stunning set of lessons and warnings and inspirations this morning.

He first tells them not to be afraid when their ministry is rejected. In fact, they should expect it.

And then boom, boom, boom.

- “Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered.”
- “Nothing secret will not become known.”
- “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.”
- “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.”

By now, the disciples' heads must have been spinning. What have we gotten ourselves into? Jesus senses this. "Do not be afraid," he tells them, again. God is aware of the sparrows; think how much more God values you.

Still – how can we *not* be afraid, when the risk of rejection and persecution is so high?

Jesus does not relent. It's worth hearing again.

"I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. / I have come to set a man against his father, / and a daughter against her mother, / ...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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Really, Jesus? Not peace, but a sword?

Really, Jesus? A son against his father, on Father's Day?

Loving you more than parent or child? Really? I love my kids, deeply, and mostly, they love me?

And because we know what is coming, we know that the invitation to take up our cross is more than rhetoric, that an admonition about losing and finding life is more than inspirational platitude.

Eugene Boring writes that Jesus is drawing parallels between the disciples' lives and his, including the rejection and persecution they will face. Do not be afraid, he repeats; speak out boldly for your faith. Boring writes that these words reflect a real tension in that church, "where people sometimes had to choose between their family and their faith." He writes that "loyalty to Jesus has priority over even the closest human relationships and life itself..." (*New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VIII, pages 260-262)

I read these words and I remember the very difficult, and often contentious debates in the church about LGBTQ justice, repeated over and over in presbyteries and congregations, and, I presume, among friends, or at the dinner table.

I read these words and I can imagine right now the very difficult, and perhaps contentious, conversations about race, policing, the economy, online, among friends, or at the dinner table.

Robert Cornwall writes that "I want to preach a message of peace. But the gospel message doesn't always work that way. Not everyone will agree with the message. Not even everyone in our families. The message Jesus preached can and does divide homes and families and for that matter churches. This is the cost of discipleship." Cornwall asks: "How do we remain true to the message, when our natural inclination is to go along to get

along? How do we stand firm when such a stand puts us at odds with friends and family?"

The fear can cut both ways...

Andrew Prior writes: "I often wonder what the lack of persecution in my life says about how little I have actually taken up my cross. And each time I wonder about this, I am fearful." We are fearful of a luke-warm faith, a timid faith.

Janet Hunt writes: "In spite of Jesus' urging not to be afraid, I confess that often I am...And yet I know there is no choice. Not in the world we are called to live and die in where so many powerful forces work against good and healing and hope. These are hard words before us now."

Hunt concludes with a word of hope in the face of her fear. "...The most powerful words of grace and comfort come...where we hear that we do have a teacher, a master, whose fate not only serves as warning for all of us who follow him --- but, ...the certain promise...that as our teacher and master, Jesus also goes before us to show us the way."

Discussing the book and movie "Just Mercy" on Wednesday evening, we spent some brief time discussing the death penalty. We knew each other, and a diversity of opinions was shared respectfully, cordially. That is the way we sought to approach church debates about human sexuality. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. But when civility and respect fail, Jesus seems to be telling us – speak truth, tell truth. Do not be afraid.

At a vigil Thursday night, black speaker after black speaker said that while it has always been the moment, that this is the moment when white people, even white Christians, must speak up, cannot let words slide, cannot let the easy racist statement go unchallenged, even when it's a beloved "uncle" or "aunt" saying it, cannot shrug our shoulders passively or timidly, cannot let our risk-aversion or sense of privilege get in the way of the Gospel message.

Following two historic Supreme Court decisions this week, Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote "...We have real differences, and they are not going away anytime soon. What's perilous right now is *how* we choose to have these arguments...(Not) all Americans of deep religious belief agree on how to address these questions in the public square. One could find multiple views — even in church pews..." (*New York Times*, "Just How Secular Should America Be?," June 18, 2020)

I mentioned a hymn a week or so ago that insists there comes "a moment to decide." There are many such moments in our lives, I would venture. We are certainly in one now. Jesus calls us to bold proclamation, truthful proclamation, and he offers no sugar-coating that when we do so, the results could be difficult – rejection, persecution, even the cross. He tells us not to be afraid, that God, who loves every creature, loves us.

That is demanding discipleship, yes. It comes with a promise, that when we say hard things and take difficult actions, when we seek to live the fullness of our faith with authenticity and integrity, we do not do it alone.

May God grant us wisdom, and courage, for the facing of this hour and for the living of these days. Amen.