

Genesis 21:8-21
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus doesn't mince words, does he? For the last several Sundays we have been listening to Jesus' preparation of his disciples before he sends them out into the world to continue his mission of ushering in God's kingdom. He keeps saying to them "Do not be afraid" ... so we can safely guess that there must be plenty to be afraid of.

What is it about Jesus that has everyone so stirred up? And why is Jesus talking about bringing a sword instead of bringing peace? Isn't this the same Jesus who told us to turn to other cheek if someone hits us? Isn't it the same Jesus who told Peter to put away his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane? Does Jesus really intend to divide families? Is that his purpose? What's going on here? And what are we to make of all of this?

The gospel lesson this morning is the sort of lesson that the well-informed priest usually delegates to the resident seminarian for preaching ... or to the new associate. If the priest has looked ahead at the readings, it might be a temptation to offer the pulpit on this particular Sunday to a guest preacher. This is not the sort of Gospel message that begs to be cracked open. This is the sort of Gospel message that strikes fear and trembling into the hearts of many preachers. But Jesus said to us, "Do not be afraid!" ... so here goes.

Let's put all of this in some context. Matthew's gospel was written after Mark's gospel ... and it was written after the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD. Matthew's audience is made up of those Jews who have come to believe that Jesus truly is the Messiah and have found themselves in some uncomfortable situations. They are caught between their profound conviction about Jesus and their religious heritage as Jews. This kind of dilemma is not hard for us to imagine. Suppose someone arrived on the scene now in 2017 and made the kind of impact on us that Jesus made on the people of his day. Imagine that many of us decided to align ourselves with this new person. Do you suppose we might get some criticism from our fellow church members? Do you think maybe other Christians in our families might look askance at our abandoning our Christian heritage in favor of this new teaching?

This new teaching of Jesus turns the social order of the day inside out and upside down ... and it's not just the Romans who are feeling threatened. Closer to home, the devout Jews ... the leadership in the Jewish community ... find Jesus to be a nuisance. He says things like "The last shall be first" and "Blessed are the poor" and "the kingdom of God has come near." Jesus is calling out the hypocrites and people are drawn to him in a powerful way. His message emphasizes the importance ... the value ... of every single human being, not just the ones at the top of the social hierarchy. Jesus doesn't care about social status. He doesn't care about material wealth. He cares about people ... individual, struggling, suffering ... people. He cares about how these people are treated ... how all people are treated. In a society where wealth equates with power, Jesus pays attention to how that power is used. He pays attention to the choices people make with their wealth. And he pays attention to how people in power use that power. Sounds a little bit like our own society, doesn't it?

He's trying to prepare the disciples for what they are going to face if they choose to continue Jesus' mission. Jesus has already authorized them to cast out demons, to cure the sick, to cleanse the lepers, and even to raise the dead. He has given them plenty of power and he knows they are going to be afraid because people are not always going to be accepting of them. The people are afraid as well. They are wondering where this power is coming from. They even speculate that Jesus himself is full of demons and that's why he can do all these miraculous things. We human beings tend to be afraid of things that we can't and don't understand. Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about the folks that call them names. They've called him names and they will do even worse to his followers. Jesus tells the disciples not to worry about these folks. They're going to be found out ... all of their secrets are going to be revealed. They won't be able to successfully cover up their own deeds. And the truth will win out. The truth always comes to the surface ... eventually.

And that's the one thing that sets Jesus apart. When He speaks, He speaks the truth ... a very basic, fundamental, undeniable truth ... the kind of truth that we recognize deep in our bones. When He speaks, we can feel our hearts saying, "Yes!" and "That's right!" When he calls out the hypocrites of His day, we know that He is speaking the truth to them and to us. No one needs to explain it to us. But we also know that calling people out about their hypocrisy will generate some wrath. It's the wrath that frightens us, not the truth that Jesus preaches.

Jesus must have known what that kind of fear feels like. Perhaps he felt some of that fear himself, and yet he spoke. He tells his disciples ... and us ... "Do not be afraid!" because he knows that fear will rise up in an attempt to still our voices. Speaking truth is not about being naïve. Speaking truth amid all the fear is not being foolhardy. Speaking truth is about having the courage to speak God's words knowing full well what the consequences might be and being

willing to take the risk anyway and letting the chips fall where they may. Speaking God's word is not about 'playing it safe.' Speaking God's word is not about deferring to fear. Speaking God's word is not about being convenient. Speaking God's word is about presenting the truth ... which is very often most inconvenient. God's truth stirs up guilt which is a very uncomfortable feeling. God's truth touches part of our soul that we can neither ignore nor deny. We know the truth when we hear it ... even as we may wish to dismiss it.

Jesus tells his disciples, if you're going to follow me, you have to be willing to speak God's inconvenient truth. If you're going to follow me, you're going to have to be willing to risk the convenient relationships you have now. Maybe it won't come to that. Maybe it will never happen that following Jesus will divide mother and daughter or father and son, but if it does, in allegiance to Jesus, we must let those chips fall where they may. We are most blessed in our families now where one member's belief in Jesus is not a bone of contention for other members of the family, but a source of strength. We are most blessed when our families support us in our spiritual journey and our allegiance to Jesus Christ, but not all members of all families share these same beliefs.

Jesus is a man of peace, so when he says, "I did not come to bring peace, but to bring the sword," he is telling his listeners and his followers that if they are going to follow him, they are going to have to make a choice that may well involve people they love who do not see Jesus in the same way. It is not his intention to divide families. It is not his intention to form rifts in relationships, but he is warning his followers that such may be the case anyway. And if it is, they must choose to risk all and side with Jesus. We can't be seduced into denying our allegiance to Jesus because we come to find out that someone we love may turn their back on us if we do. That's the exact dilemma Jesus warned us about. And that's why he said to us, "Do not be afraid."

It may appear to us that we will lose people and places and things that seem to be the most important things in the world to us if we follow Jesus. And perhaps we will. But Jesus has promised us abundant life when we pick up our cross, when for His sake we are willing to risk everything rather than deny him, and when we set aside our fears about speaking God's truth and accepting whatever comes as a result of our courage.

These words are not just for the disciples of Jesus' day. These words are for us as well. In recent history, we need only to think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer to be reminded that less than 80 years ago, a man of God was executed for speaking God's truth to power. He risked it all and lost his earthly life, but gained his immortal soul. And even more recently than that, just 50 years ago, we can be reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr. who spoke God's words of truth and challenged

the status quo of his day that did not reflect that truth. The chips that fell for him came from an assassin's rifle.

Speaking God's truth is dangerous, but Jesus says to his disciples ... and to us ... do not be afraid. The fear will be inevitable, but Jesus us bids us not to give in to that fear ... not to let that fear still our voice when we are called to speak God's truth.

Being a Christian isn't easy. Sometimes it is very hard. Sometimes it is frightening. Sometimes it is downright dangerous ... and Jesus knows that full well. But Jesus challenges us to do it anyway ... even when we are afraid ... even when it is dangerous ... even when it is costly to us. It would seem that any rational person would have every right to be afraid ... and would even be prudent to be afraid ... but Jesus is bidding us to speak God's truth nevertheless ... to have the courage of our conviction and the commitment of our love for Him

Abundant and everlasting life is what's at stake ... and the Holy Spirit will provide us with everything we need ... including the words we need to say and the courage to say them.

Do not be afraid!

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.