

HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew 10:24-39, NRSV, emended

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the tenth chapter.

C: Glory to you, O Lord.

[Prior to this reading Jesus commissioned The Twelve to carry forward his work of preaching and healing. Here he continues his teaching in preparation for their task.]

"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master. It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house *Beelzebul*, how much more will they malign those of his household!

"So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that 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 the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's leave. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

"Therefore, everyone who acknowledges me in the presence of others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But, whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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. 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."

P: The Gospel of Our Lord!

C: Praise to you, O Christ.

These are edgy readings this week. In the first reading from Jeremiah we have these lines:

*I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.
For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.*

Being a prophet can be a tough gig sometimes and this is one of those times. The message he has been called to give is not one that anyone wants to hear, and yet he cannot NOT speak it. The price for this is steep, but when God calls you to give a word to the people, you give that word to the people. The alternative, Jeremiah tells us, is this:

*If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.*

Jeremiah is the first prophet from whom we hear the inner experience of a prophet called to give a message that is repugnant to his listeners – and to the prophet himself. So it is with all who are called to speak the truth. No one said it would be easy to do or that it would be well-received.

And in the psalm we hear another voice echoing some of Jeremiah's experience.

*It is zeal for your house that has consumed me;
the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.
When I humbled my soul with fasting,
they insulted me for doing so.*

And in verses that were not read this morning, we hear more about the cost of discipleship.

*When I made sackcloth my clothing,
I became a byword to them.
I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate,
and the drunkards make songs about me.*

Even the drunkards are making songs about this person. Geez. Does it get any lower than that?

In the second reading, Paul writes about dying with Christ. We speak of this often in our understanding of baptism but it's hard to think about the depth of the meaning of this when we baptize primarily babies, on whom the dew of new life still rests. Madeleine L'Engle writes in her book, Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art, about being baptized into Christ's death and resurrection:

I am glad that in the communion of my church we are baptized as infants, because this emphasized that the gift of death to this world and birth into the Kingdom of God is, in fact, gift – it is nothing we have earned, or ever, as infants, chosen. It is God's freely bestowed love.

Juan Carlos Ortiz, a priest in South America, uses this baptismal formula, "I kill you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and I make you born into the Kingdom of God to serve and please him."

Surely dying to this world and being born into the Kingdom of God is a gift, but you do, in fact, have to die in order to receive it. So there's that. It is Law and Gospel. The bad news is that you have to die. The good news is that you will also have a new life in God's Kingdom. And death cannot hold you anymore than it could hold Christ. Which means that you are now a dangerous person. If you cannot stop someone by threatening them with torture and death (both experiences we share with Christ), then they cannot be stopped. **You** cannot be stopped...but it will come at a price. That's just the way things work.

Finally, in the gospel Jesus speaks some truth to his disciples. It is worth noting that in the second paragraph he tells them that they should not be afraid **three different times**. That can't be a good sign! Why would it make sense to tell people not to be afraid that many times in a row if there were not something out there to be very afraid of!

In a nutshell, Jesus (and certainly the first reading and psalm as well) is warning us that there will be great resistance to the message and actions he commands us to do. There *will* be reason to fear because the powers and principalities, as Paul refers to the forces that would require our allegiance if we are to "get along", will not willingly give up their power and play nice. If that would ever happen, it would have happened a long time ago...but that's not the way it works.

There will be resistance to the message of the gospel, and sometimes it will be violent.

But this is also a lesson in putting first things first. In the Netflix series Ozark, the main character, Marty Byrde, is an accounting whiz. One day a man who allegedly works in installing tile (but really works for a major drug cartel) meets with Marty and his colleague, asking them to look at his books, wondering if they would work for him. After looking over the man's financials, Marty knows that he must be involved in something highly illegal and turns him down. But the man persists and invites Marty and his wife to spend the weekend with him and his wife at his opulent and palatial home. One evening he and Marty are having a conversation and he asks Marty what his highest value is, what's most important to him in his life.

Del: What are your ethics? The one thing that trumps all others?

Marty: To protect and provide for my family.

Del: Exactly. You will be able to provide. More than you can possibly dream. Because you are the best I've ever seen, Marty. And we will protect you.

Marty and his wife finally agree to work for Del (and the drug cartel) and the minute they do so, Del pulls out his gun and murders the guy who *used* to do Marty's job for them right in front of them. They realize then and there that they have made a poor choice.

And, this is what Jesus is talking about when he says,

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.

It's the First Commandment coming at us. God. Must. Come. First. Anything else is idolatry. All of what Jesus said is true. You cannot love anything else more than God or it will kill you. So take up your cross and follow Jesus. Lose yourself and you will find yourself. Keep your eye on the prize and keep marching. It's a long road that we are called to walk and it will take more than we have in order to keep walking it. Life (God) will always give us more than we can handle, contrary to popular belief. That is, according to Luther, the primary purpose of the Law: to show us up for who we really are, to make us realize that we cannot save ourselves, to bring us to the point of despair in our own strength and efforts, so that we will long for a savior.

But this is so hard to do and I am so very tired.... These are not the texts that I'm looking for this week. Not the Jeremiah reading – I don't want to have what happened to him happen to me! Not the psalm – who wants drunkards making up songs about them? And most certainly not the gospel!

But there is something for those of you who are weary and heavy laden, for those of you who can barely make it through the day and take care of your own responsibilities (without breaking down and crying...) and who are now being asked to work for justice for the downtrodden others. You now belong to Christ. You have been grafted into him, baptized into his death AND resurrection. You are a new creation.

So, how do we keep up the good fight? How do we keep doing the work of God's reign when there are so many forces working against us?

Richard Swanson, pastor and Augustana University professor, likes to refer to Jesus as "turning the world right-side up." Our conviction as Christians is that the future that God promises is so real and so weighty that we can act "as if" it is true right now. That the arc of God's future is so sure that we can take it to the bank. Regardless of appearances and the despair that can come from so many having worked so long to help us become an anti-racist society, we are promised that our efforts will not be in vain. We are so confident in the righteous outcome God promises that we sing the songs from Revelation – the songs that will be song when God completes God's good work in us and in the world – that we sing them in church every Sunday. We are convinced that, in the end, God wins, love wins, peace with justice wins.

But I am so very weary. Sometimes it's all I can do to get through the day. And then I feel tremendously guilty about complaining about that because what if I were black? What if I were poor? What if I worried every single day about where my next meal will come from or if I or someone I love will be pulled over by law enforcement and end up dead or in jail?

Even so. What do we do when we are so overwhelmed by our present reality that just getting out of bed to face another day can be a noteworthy accomplishment?

African American theologian and mystic Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman writes about this journey that we have been called to.

Howard Thurman (via Richard Rohr)

A friend of mine was given an assignment in a class in dramatics. Each time she tried to read her selection aloud before the class, tears came and her strong emotional reaction made it impossible to go through with it. One day the teacher asked her to remain after class for a conference. The essence of the teacher's words to her was this: "You must read the selection before the class tomorrow. I understand what is happening to you and that is why I insist that you do this tomorrow. It is important that you realize that you must read this selection through, crying every step of the way, perhaps, if you expect to read it through without crying." . . .

There are many experiences which we face that are completely overwhelming. As we see them, they are too terrible even to contemplate. And yet we must face them and deal with them directly. . . . To deal with [the problem] without the emotional upheaval is necessary if you are ever going to be able to manage it at all. There can be no more significant personal resolution . . . than this: I will face the problem I have been putting off because of too much fear, of too many tears, of too much resentment, even if it means crying all the way through, in order that I may [learn to] deal with it without fear, tears, or resentment.

Recently Richard Rohr shared some thoughts from Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, a Zen sensei (or teacher). Years ago she felt the call to become an activist for social justice. She writes about the difficulties of continuing the struggle for justice while maintaining a sense of peace.

My formal Zen practice and training were teaching me to find a more restful place that I could abide in within myself despite the chaos and calamity [of] living in an unjust society. . . . It also gave me a way to be in response to sometimes overwhelming situations that could just lead me to a downward spiral of anger and negativity. . . . I advocated for [a] more balanced approach to fiercely address injustice from a place of empowerment as a warrior—but one that was ultimately committed to peace rather than aggression. This path recognized the clarity and resilience brought about by cultivating one's inner life. . . . I saw this as a more sustainable path, especially for Black people, whose road to victory in the external landscape would likely be a long one given the deep entrenchment of the forces of oppression set against us.

In response to the events of September 11th, I wrote what became known as the Warrior-Spirit Prayer of Awakening. . . .

May all beings be granted with the strength, determination and wisdom to extinguish anger and reject violence as a way.

May all suffering cease and may I seek, find, and fully realize the love and compassion that already lives within me and allow them to inspire and permeate my every action.

May I exercise the precious gift of choice and the power to change [as] that which makes me uniquely human and is the only true path to liberation.

May I swiftly reach complete, effortless freedom so that my fearless, unhindered action be of benefit to all.

To which Richard Rohr replied, "May I lead the life of a warrior."

And to which I reply, amen.