

Sermon - Proper 7, Year A
Matthew 10:24-39
A Study of an Hard Saying

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

Sometimes, to be a Christian is to stand at the edge of the vast and mighty ocean of things that we do not know. But in our faith, we have a gift. We have a tool. When something is hard, ask questions. This is what I taught to my teenage students in Philadelphia for two years: when something is hard, ask questions. And so throughout each class as we studied the Bible together, we asked five questions: What is going on in this passage? What questions do I have about this passage? What does this passage tell me about God? What does this passage mean for my own life? And how might this passage help me to pray? We use these in our Bible study here at St. Luke's too – sometimes spending an hour on just one. But when something is hard, we ask questions.

Today's Gospel text from St. Matthew is hard. In fact, biblical scholars quite literally have quite literally named this particular passage as a part of Jesus' "hard sayings" in Matthew's Gospel. These are places in the Gospel where Jesus surprises us with some of his instructions and proclamation. These are the texts we don't generally see in children's picture books or in pious greeting cards. We do not generally pick up decorative signs that read: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." These do not seem to be the words of the baby Jesus in the manger or the Good Shepherd who gently gathers in his sheep. And so we ask questions:

What is going on in this passage? Well, we find ourselves in chapter ten here, continuing Jesus' instructions to his disciples that we've been encountering each Sunday for the past few weeks. Matthew is the most Jewish Gospel in the Bible. Matthew himself was a faithful Jewish man, a maligned tax collector whom Jesus called to follow him. His foremost project in his

Gospel is to show that Jesus is indeed the Messiah that Israel has hoped for for hundreds of years. Matthew knew well the Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets, and he uses his story of the life of Christ to show that this man is indeed the one that Israel has been waiting for. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus is traveling throughout Galilee, the region around the Sea of Galilee where he had made his own home. He is walking from town to town, teaching and healing, and he has just called the final few of his twelve disciples. He instructed them to travel light – to take nothing for their journey, not even a second tunic or pair of sandals – and to beware that they will be met with resistance, even persecution. Today’s passage picks up right where we left off this week: with Jesus’ caution that the days ahead could be marked by danger.

What questions do we have about this passage? This section could comprise the rest of the sermon, but there is one question I am fairly confident is most common: what does it mean when this man who said “blessed are the peacemakers” – a man who, for all our evidence, seems to have never raised a sword in his life – what does it mean when he says that he has come not to bring peace, but a sword? And what are we to make of this difficult proclamation about family members in conflict? Fathers against sons? Daughters against mothers? What is going on here? This is hard. Ask questions.

Our next Bible study question is “what does this passage tell me about God?” and it is good to help each other think critically here. In the writings of the prophets – Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and all the rest – there is a central movement that happens throughout each of them. The prophets all engage different modes of expression at different times: sometimes they are lamenting – bemoaning their suffering or the ignorance of Israel. Sometimes they are exhorting – they are begging their hearers to repent and return to God. Sometimes they are praising – singing hymns to the God of heaven and earth. But no matter what they are up to, the prophets are

pointing to a unified truth: God is God. And we are not. Whatever we have built or earned or imagined, nothing is comparable to the fresh and extraordinary mechanisms of the Living God. Nothing is more important than this. And the truth of this – that God is God, and we are not, and thus we are called to worship him, as Jesus says, in spirit and truth – this is the truth that is being revealed. The prophets all write about revelation. The true substance of the universe is being made known. All of creation is on a journey of discovery, and piece by piece, the reality of God is appearing to the world, wild and alive.

Matthew, a faithful Jew, versed in the prophets, picks up on this theme. He shows in his writing how Jesus is the final move in God’s work of revelation. Not only does God reveal his truth, but here we encounter the revelation of God’s Son. This passage tells us that we are in new territory here. The old ways of knowing and being have been changed. Whatever we have built or earned or imagined, nothing is comparable to the fresh and extraordinary mechanisms of the Living God.

So what does this mean for our own lives? Does it mean that violence is good? Does it mean that we are to hate our own family members? Mercifully, that’s not what Jesus is up to here. What Jesus is saying is that the stakes are high. The old ways of knowing and being have been changed. Believing in a Gospel of life that values all people, lifts up the lowly, cares for the forgotten, and blesses the weak is not a popular message among the powers of world, and there may be some difficult consequences. To proclaim “blessed are the peacemakers” might result in you being met with an emperor’s sword. But God is God, and we are not. And nothing is more important than this.

When we begin to see our lives as a part of this extraordinary reality, it may make things more difficult for us. It might mean we realize we need to make a big change – perhaps quit our

job or leave a relationship. It might mean that our old ways of being and knowing might need to be dramatically reorganized. It might mean that we are rejected for caring for someone in need or persecuted for resisting the powers that trade in death. It might mean we face conflict with friends – even family. But we are never left without a word of grace. Jesus says: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

How might this passage help us to pray? Perhaps like this: “Almighty God, you have ordered the world by your gracious providence to reveal your perfect love for all creation. Help us to see your handiwork in all things. Enkindle in our hearts a love that knows no bounds. Help us to put nothing – nothing at all – before our love of you. Give us strength and courage to ask questions when things are hard. And guide us ever closer to the joys of heaven.” Amen.