

“The Difficult Sayings of Jesus: 2) The Christ Who Brings a Sword”

a sermon by

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Text: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:32)

Over the weeks of Lent we are looking at some of the difficult sayings of Jesus. Through the years the church has not really come to grips with the radical nature of the Christian gospel. We have domesticated Jesus by turning him into something respectable, practical, plausible, and appealing. In doing so, we have placed ourselves in conflict with the clear witness of the New Testament.

Someone once said that Jesus was crucified not because he said, “Behold, the lilies of the field that spin not and toil not,” but because he said, “Behold the thieves in the temple, how they steal.”

Nowhere is this more evident than in these difficult sayings of Jesus: the saying about taking up one’s cross, denying oneself and following Jesus; the attitude of Jesus toward his mother and brothers and sisters, which we will examine next week; the saying about God and money; the unpardonable sin.

I.

This morning we are looking at the saying in Matthew, where Jesus announces that he has not come to bring peace but a sword.

Now, let’s be honest. This saying is offensive. Not only is it offensive, it appears to be contradictory to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in which he encourages his disciples to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to love one’s enemies.

There is even tension about this saying within Scripture. When Luke records this saying, he quotes Jesus as saying, "I have not come to bring peace, but division." (Luke 12:51-53) That tells us that early on in the Christian community the church struggled with this saying. Like us, the church struggled to understand what Jesus meant with this image of the sword.

So what are we to make of this saying of Jesus?

II.

There is one theme that connects this saying of Jesus with all of the other sayings: Discipleship means sacrifice. One cannot understand the sayings of Jesus without understanding this. One cannot understand Jesus without understanding this as well. Jesus made this very clear: "The Son of Man," he said, "came not to be served, but to serve."

This recovery of the element of sacrifice is not only essential to the Christian life, it is essential to the health of our community and nation today.

This week David Brooks wrote a remarkable article in the New York Times he entitled "No Picnic for Me Either." In this piece, he referred to the speech on education that President Obama made this past week in which the President cited an incident from his own childhood. When he was a boy, his mother would wake him up at 4:30 in the morning to tutor him for several hours before he went to school. When this young boy complained about getting up so early, his mother responded, "This is no picnic for me either, Buster."

That experience outlines what is necessary to reform education in this country: relationships and rigor. Over the years, we have spent billions of dollars trying to improve public education in this country. But while government programs may have their place, there is no substitute for relationships and rigor. Ask a young person who has graduated from high school to list the teachers who mattered in his or her life, and that person will reel off a series of names. Ask a young person who has not graduated, and he or she will not even understand the question. Relationships like that are beyond their experiences.

This is true in the church as well. One of the great mistakes we have made in the church is watering down the discipleship that Jesus calls us to. We have often turned Christianity into little more than a kind of social respectability that somehow urges people to be good people and do good things. Nothing could be further from the New Testament.

We have done Jesus a great disservice by making him into something he wasn't. He wasn't about trying to make people nice. He was about trying to make people follow him.

That is a message that one finds from the beginning to the end of the Gospels. Jesus understood that life was filled with decisions and often these decisions are not as complicated as we sometimes pretend. You cannot serve God and Mammon. There is a narrow way and a broad way. Where a person's treasure is, there is his heart. A person who puts his hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God.

There is a place for rigor in the church. This morning, we are recognizing young people who took the time and effort to memorize a catechism. Things that are important take effort.

Someone told me last week that one of the criticisms leveled against me as minister of this church was my insistence that worship services and session meetings should not last more than 59 minutes. I told them that was not entirely true. Worship services were not to last longer than 56 minutes.

III.

But, there is more to this saying of Jesus than simply a word about sacrifice. Jesus takes this matter to the next level when he insists that he did not come to bring peace on earth but a sword.

Let us be clear about this. There are very few achievements in life that happen without sacrifice and bloodshed. Slavery in this country was not abolished until the country had endured a Civil War. The Civil Rights Movement would have never happened had not a group of people been willing to ride buses in the South. Many were beaten. Some were killed.

Someone raised the question as to why the gospel of Jesus Christ could not come in a peaceable fashion. The answer to that is that darkness in the ethical and spiritual realm hates the light.

Moreover, Jesus takes this metaphor of the “sword” a step further. He speaks of setting a son against a father, a daughter against a mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

These are hard words. But more than this, there is ample evidence in the New Testament that at times, Jesus was set over against his own family. (Matthew 12: 50) This past fall, when I was in New York with my son Will, we saw the play “A Man For All Seasons,” the magnificent story of Thomas More, who found himself opposed to the divorce of his friend King Henry VIII. My son picked up on an element of this story that had not occurred to me. Sir Thomas More went on to be beheaded at the order of King Henry. Later, he was made a Saint and Martyr of the Church of England. My son, however, raised the question of how Sir Thomas’ decision affected his own family. His wife and daughter were both distraught that Thomas would not take the oath supporting the king. They knew that Henry was going to marry Anne Boleyn whether or not Thomas approved. In the play, you sense the poverty that begins to creep into this once prosperous family now that Thomas is no longer Lord Chancellor. I wondered if Thomas considered his family. To be sure, it was a very high-minded thing he did. But like every decision, it had consequences on his family.

But I think we need to be very clear about this matter. There is every evidence in the New Testament that Jesus honored the value of family and home. But there is also every evidence that Jesus recognized a higher loyalty than loyalty to family.

One of the greatest missionaries that the church has ever produced was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who for many years carried on a remarkable medical ministry in French Equatorial Africa. When Albert Schweitzer announced to his friends that he was embarking on this

endeavor, many of his friends were shocked and urged him not to do this. After all, he was one of the most gifted medical doctors in Germany. He was a brilliant scholar whose work, *The Search for the Historical Jesus*, was a seminal work in New Testament studies. Moreover, he was also a brilliant musician who played the organ and wrote compositions. His friends could not understand why someone with all the promise and potential that Schweitzer possessed would give up the luxuries of modern life to work under very primitive circumstances in a remote part of the world. But Schweitzer had listened carefully to the words of Jesus who said, “One who is not willing to take up his cross and follow Jesus is not worthy of Jesus.”

IV.

The passage concludes with the saying that the person who seeks his life will lose it and the one who loses his life for the sake of Jesus will find it. Someone once observed of this saying of Jesus that either it was the most powerful truth ever spoken, or it was one of the cruelest hoaxes ever perpetrated on humankind.

When Dr. Thomas Currie, the Dean of Union Theological Seminary-PSCE campus here in Charlotte, spoke to the Church in Vocation group several weeks ago, he mentioned the “embarrassment” that is often experienced by ministers concerning their vocation. I remember my daughter Lucy commenting on this when she was a student at Princeton Seminary – how suddenly at a party, when someone asked you what you were doing and you said you were a Seminary student, there was a strange silence – as if people were thinking, “Why would a person want to do that?”

Currie went on to say that in a culture whose pursuit of happiness is largely defined in monetary terms, the ministry seems baffling because it seems to some, not only an unucrative profession, but that the embarrassment is also connected to the perceived lack of ambition that such a salary must represent.

But one wonders whether beneath all of this embarrassment that our culture feels in the presence of those who minister – often dismissing ministers as likable fools, timidly unambitious slackers who waste their gifts on what is feeble and poor and petty – one wonders if all of this embarrassment does not disguise a real, if vague, recognition that ministry might just be a dangerous vocation, one that is capable of exposing all of us in the most humiliating ways, that in spite of all our attempts to demonstrate our self sufficiency, we are all nothing more than what Shakespeare once called “these poor naked wretches.”

That is why in his remarks, Tom Currie observed that the greatest embarrassment that ministry knows is the embarrassment of riches. That, I think, is at the heart of this saying of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel. When we give our hearts, souls, and might to Christ, we do not have anything taken from us. To the contrary, we receive far more than we could have ever imagined.

That certainly does not mean that life for all of us cannot be at times frustrating, lonely or difficult. But the great wonder is this. Christ is rich. And he gives lavishly. He is there in the boat in the storm, when the waves are high and the wind is ferocious, rebuking the waves, silencing the wind. He is there when we are hungry, when there are more demands on us than we could possibly meet, when the resources of our lives seem woefully inadequate to the demands placed

upon us – he is there breaking bread and spreading plenty, even as he did to those five thousand that gathered by the Sea of Galilee.

That is something that at some level all of us know – that following Jesus is not some terrible obligation, but at its heart, it is a gift, and that all of us – no matter how bitterly we complain – have received far more than we were able to give.

The life of faith is an embarrassment to be sure, but it is in truth, an embarrassment of riches, and for that we should all be grateful.

Thanks be to God. Amen.