



SUNDAY SERMON

Who's on First?

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 10, verses 24 to 39.

'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 him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by 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.

'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before 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.

Come, Holy Spirit, and make these words Your Word to us. Amen.

As I wrote this sermon I kept thinking about Abbott and Costello's classic routine *Who's on First*, about a team of strangely named ballplayers – Who, What, I Don't Know, Why, Tomorrow, Today ... Sometimes following Jesus' teachings, which have come down to us through 2,000 years of translators and interpreters, can feel like that classic of miscommunication. Who's on first? What's on Second, I Don't Know's on Third ... and when his teachings are this hard to understand, maybe we're with the shortstop, I Don't Care.

Jesus is all about choices in his "Training Day" talk to his followers. He's talking tough. Where's that nice, gentle, loving Jesus? The Prince of Peace? Why is Jesus talking about swords? And what does he have against mothers-in-law? He didn't even have one. Well, he's just quoting the prophet Micah on the in-law part. But what about that sword? If Jesus didn't come to bring peace, why are we here? Statistics show the majority of churchgoers go to church to find tranquility. Lord knows we don't need any more conflict or violence.

But Jesus was not saying he came to bring conflict. He said conflict would be an inevitable consequence of his mission, of following him. Jesus came to stand up to the evils of this world, injustice and oppression and corruption and complacency. That doesn't make your life peaceful. Jesus did not say, "I have come not to bring peace, but violence." He said, "I have come not to bring peace but a sword."

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DATE

The Third Sunday
after Pentecost
Sun., June 25, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Dr. Kate Heichler

READINGS

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

Look at some of the other ways the word “sword” is used in the New Testament: The Sword of the Spirit is one of the defensive weapons we take up against the devil. In Hebrews we read that the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword, “...*dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow* ...” That is surgically sharp! There are circumstances under which we’re willing to consider violent action ... When there is something in our bodies that needs to be removed or repaired, we’re quite willing to have a surgeon cut – violently – into our flesh and bone and do what’s needed. So, what about our spiritual health? Jesus - and Paul – is saying there is evil in the world, and Christ-followers need to be equipped to distinguish the Kingdom of Light from the realm of darkness. The sword Jesus is talking about is a sword of distinction, that distinguishes good and evil, what will bless us and make us effective as disciples, from what will harm us and make us complacent and weak. Jesus does divide people sometimes. He claims our fidelity over all other claims. The priorities of this world – family, wealth, convenience, distraction – do not make us effective disciples. Jesus is just calling it. We can be fuzzy, or we can be clear. Jesus came not to bring peace but reality.

I don’t know if you’re familiar with the Jesus doll. I think I’ve seen one here. It’s a rag doll about this high, with brown hair and a beard, a tunic and coat and sandals. Jesus the doll is soft and squishable and great for children. At my last church, we’d give Jesus the doll to kids to take home for a week. They were encouraged to take Jesus everywhere they went, and to write in the journal that came with him. Where did Jesus go this week? One girl took Jesus to school with her, and the teacher wasn’t so sure it was legal. She said, “Why don’t we just put Jesus in the cubby for the day?” But Janie’s mother said, “We’re not putting Jesus in a cubby!” This is a woman who had never seemed all that interested in God! But she spent an hour getting permission to have Jesus sit with Janie in class. Other moms were not such crusaders. A Sunday School teacher confessed that when her Jewish friends came over, she stuck Jesus in a corner. That same person once missed a service at church she was deeply looking forward to because her mother-in-law decreed a family picnic. Mother-in-law won that round. It was too uncomfortable for Sandy to say, “I have a commitment at church.” In our culture, family comes first. And we are much more formed by our culture than by discipleship to Jesus.

But Jesus did not come to make us more comfortable – Jesus came to draw us closer to God. He very clearly redefined family; he said family isn’t our blood kin, it is those who follow him – and he said loving God comes first, no matter what.

As the adventures of “Jesus the doll” continued, the kids were loving it. But I discovered that many of the moms did not enjoy having him around. “Oh my God,” one said, “It’s unbelievably stressful having Jesus! I was afraid the dog would eat his sandals, or him. I was afraid we’d leave him somewhere!” One mother, who wasn’t able to get Jesus back to us for about three weeks, wrote an apologetic email. She’d been sick, the kids had been sick, her husband had been away on business, some other things happened ... she concluded, “It just wasn’t a good two weeks to have the Son of God at our house!”

Well, here’s a news flash: it’s never a good week to have the Son of God around! Life is a whole lot easier with the priorities the world presents us: “Take what you want, when you want it, with whom you want it.” But if that was the choice you’d made, chances are you wouldn’t be sitting here this morning. There are plenty of other places to be, and plenty of people in them.

I’m assuming you’re here because you have already entered that relationship Jesus is inviting you into, or you are curious and you’re exploring it. Maybe you’ve already discovered what Christians have known for 2000 years, that life is infinitely richer – though no less painful – when you are aware of having the Son of God around your house, that the God who made us and gave us the lives we have, has a claim on us. Jesus did not come to make us feel better about our lives – Jesus came to draw us closer in the one relationship we will have for eternity, in intimacy with God. Starting that relationship here and now does make our lives more purposeful – and often more stressful.

Jesus came to make us disciples. Disciples, Jesus said, put Him first. Period. Following Jesus does not mean that nothing else in our lives matters; it means we gradually allow ourselves to put Him first, above all, above every other thing and person who claims our love. It’s not either-or; it’s both-and... and in the order of priority. God comes first. As we make that choice, become willing to lose our life for his sake – we find it. That was St. Paul’s experience – that when he let his old willful self be transformed by Jesus’ love, he started to really live for the first time: *We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. And if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.*

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“Dying with Christ,” and “rising anew with Christ,” which we symbolize in our baptismal waters, doesn’t mean literally losing our lives – it means loosening our grip on all the things that have priority in our lives. Our children, our things, our convenience. Discipleship doesn’t mean giving up those things – just loosening our grip, allowing God to reshuffle our priorities. Our promise as Christians is that we are dead to sin but alive in Christ. Sin and Christ both live in us – which will we choose to feed, allow to be the boss of us? In every area, we can look at our choices, how we spend our money and time, and open them to be reshuffled as the Spirit prompts us.

What do you want to acquire or improve this summer? How do they reflect discipleship priorities? Ask this one question: “Will this draw me closer to God, or distract me from God?” “Will these shoes or this trip or that relationship draw me closer to God, or distract me from God?” That’s a way to put God first in our decisions. Look at how you want to spend your time. What values do you want your children to take on? That “stuff” matters or that spirit life matters? “Will this draw me closer to God, or distract me from God?”

We have choices. Close to 50,000 people die every day in this world, due to poverty. 50,000 preventable deaths. There are some 50 million orphans worldwide. Let’s not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by those numbers. Let’s just ask God to show us one we can share our resources with. Just one. I can tell you how to help a child orphaned by AIDS in Kenya get an education – and live into a future that will break the cycle of poverty and shame and deprivation, not only for her, but for her whole region, even country. I know you can tell me of opportunities to do that closer to home. We can reduce our consumption of energy, of food, of stuff we don’t need. We can reject the culture of materialism and affluence which threatens to unravel us. We can choose to direct our time and attention toward the things of God.

Will that please the people in our lives? Not necessarily. Drawing closer to God puts our loyalties at risk, and guess what? That creates conflict. That’s what Jesus is saying – the conflict is not a punishment; it’s a by-product, because we don’t live in a world that is oriented toward God. Jesus is just being straight with those who would be his disciples: if you follow me, and you start making some different choices, it’s going to shake up some of the people close to you.

Friends, we are called to be disciples year-round. Every day. We get to choose. We can decide to pray more and nurture our God-life. We can decide to consume less and share more. We can to decide whether we’re going to be disciples of Jesus or onlookers.

Who’s on First in your life? If it’s Jesus, the rest of the infield – and the outfield – will fall into place.

Amen.