

Pentecost 3A
Matthew 10:24-39
Sunday, June 21, 2020

So, isn't this just the perfect Father's Day text! Perhaps, *not* exactly what Hallmark had in mind! Though you have to give the writer of Matthew credit. He certainly makes you sit up and pay attention! Jesus says, "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.

Happy *Father's* Day?! So much for brunch and the afternoon off for dear old dad! Yikes!! What happened to lovable old Jesus? Good shepherd Jesus? Welcoming sinners and outcast Jesus? The peace that passes all understanding Jesus? Who is this guy? No peace, but a sword?!

Indeed, how *do* we reconcile these words with the images of love and mercy and grace and forgiveness that are so much a part of our understanding of Jesus? What *do* we do with this text? Well, on the one hand, we recognize that Jesus' words are, perhaps, more *descriptive* than they are *prescriptive*. That is, Jesus' words truly describe what the experience was of those within earshot who followed him in the first century: Roman authorities killed them for their belief, religious leaders banished them, and, thus, families were torn

apart because of tensions around following this Jesus. And Jesus' words are less a pronouncement of what things would look like.

Because Christianity has been such a dominant part of Western culture for so many centuries, I suspect that we may fail to understand how radical and offensive Jesus was in the first century. There are, of course, those today who claim that Christianity is marginalized and persecuted because we can't enforce public prayer in schools, or place a nativity creche in a public space at Christmas, or soccer leagues are encroaching on Sunday morning worship. Honestly though, this whining is the cry of entitlement *not* persecution. Christianity's privileged position in Western culture for so long makes losing that advantage seem like the tables are turned or the jury is rigged or the playing field has been skewed. However, let us be clear, we struggle not with the life and death circumstances of the first believers. Unless, of course, you live in a country in the world where there truly is persecution of Christianity and other traditions. There, like the first century, you would be able to understand the threat to believing in Jesus and the discord that it could create within your most intimate relationships, your family, because of the very threat to your life.

Which, perhaps, is a helpful focus for us today and in our lives more broadly. Where do we mistake our entitlement for persecution? During a meeting this past week, a local clergy person ranted about faith communities not being treated as essential services. That we had ceded this position, and, therefore, the moral state of our country was in jeopardy. Now, the moral state of our

country may very well be in jeopardy, but it is not because we aren't considered essential services. The moral state of our country is in jeopardy because of the inequities that we have allowed to develop between the wealthy and the poor. Not because faith communities weren't considered essential services. The moral state of our country is in jeopardy because of the health care disparities that are exposed during a pandemic like this and that people of color are disproportionately and more severely impacted by the Coronavirus. Not because faith communities weren't considered essential services. The moral state of the United States is in jeopardy because we stop investing in education and the infrastructure of support for all people and think that everyone pulls him or herself up by the bootstraps while forgetting that some were born on third base while others were born with two strikes. Not because faith communities weren't considered essential services.

While the first century and today are vastly different worlds and, thus, we read this text through different lenses, perhaps what they share in common is a worldview dominated by the paradigm of winners and losers. Thus, for first century Christians, they were sometimes brutally treated for their belief. Implied in this, of course, is that there were better ways to believe. And for those today who long for a Golden Age of Christianity, where it held sway, the converse of the first century exists. We now hold the power.

Yet, the very heart of Christianity is not about power. It is about suffering love. Which, the truth be told, is precisely what Jesus invites his disciples into and, thus, warns them of the consequences of such love. The world cannot

abide it. Shusaku Endo's classic novel, *Silence*, offers a classic image of this conundrum. In the story set in the 17th century Japan, the protagonist Rodrigues, a young Portuguese Jesuit missionary to the country, is told by his Japanese captors to trample on a *fumie*, a bronze image of Christ, in order to save the lives of five Japanese Christians who are being tortured. Almost out of his mind with horror and anguish, Rodrigues seems to hear the *fumie*-Christ speak to him, telling him: It's all right, I understand, I came into the world to share your sufferings; go ahead and step. And so Rodrigues steps.

It's not that I am inviting you to reject Christ. Certainly not. Rather, the image that Endo paints is one that flies in the face of our 21st century sensibilities of being in control and possessing the ability to believe on our own. Yet, perhaps, what Jesus expresses in today's gospel is that true belief is nigh impossible by ourselves. Indeed, to hear that one must deny father, mother, and family is to recognize that such belief is unhealthy and, ultimately, unattainable. It's in the moment of such recognition, that, perhaps, we too might hear the image of Jesus speak those words that Rodrigues heard, "It's all right, I understand. I came into the world to share your sufferings; go ahead and step." However, our step isn't away from belief. Rather, to hear this and trust that you are not alone and this faith thing is so much bigger than you is really the first step toward walking into belief. It is recognizing that, in the same way as the best mother and father unconditionally love us and accept us so that we can become who we are to be, so also God unconditionally loves and accepts us, so that we might live more fully the gift that we have been given.

