Jim's Sermon – June 25, 2023

MATTHEW 10:24-39

Jesus said, "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 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. 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."

Sometimes being a Christian can be rather confusing, affair. The Gospel for today is full of reassurances and promises on one hand and threats and demands on the other. We like the former, promises, that God loves and cherishes us, will count the hairs on our head. (More easily done with some of us than others). But we are not so fond of the demands and the threats. Although some people seem to find it easier to believe that God is out to get humanity than to care lovingly for us and provide our needs.

But like human life in general, the writings of the New Testament have more than one tone, more than one message, being full of both promises of God's love and warnings about the dangers that come with closing ourselves off from God.

And why would we expect it to be any different? Jesus was fully human and fully divine, subject to emotional and physiological

responses to situations just as we are. This was the mission of Jesus, to become like us. . . so that we might know how to become like God. Sometime Jesus was clearly exasperated with his followers. He seemed to feel despair at times, he knew that humans were capable of horrible abuse of one another. He suffered as we suffer. He got angry, sometimes to the point of lashing out physically, as when he drove the money lenders out of the temple. But he also enjoyed a good meal and glass of wine as much as anyone.

Jesus' teachings came both from the inspiration he received from the Father and from his own experience. Sometimes his teaching is like a love letter from God, a soothing balm, and sometimes it is a sword.

I have always tended toward the loving, kinder gentler, aspects of the Gospel. When I read a Gospel such as the one we have today, it is a jolt, a wake-up call, a reminder that faith requires commitment and dedication. If the Gospel sometimes portrays the Christian life as hard, it's because it sometimes is. The harsher messages of the Gospel don't in any way negate the fact that God's love is unconditional, but rather that show us that love doesn't always appear as a little angel with ruby red cheeks. Sometimes love can be something quite different.

The love Jesus talks about is not an emotion or set of emotions. While it may be accompanied by feelings, love is not about how we feel or what we say. Love is what happens when we are faced with someone in need. The love Jesus teaches is love in action.

Fyodor Dovstoevsky said it succinctly in his novel, The Brothers Karozomov:

"I am sorry I can say nothing more to console you, for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action, rapidly performed and in the sight of all. Men will even give their lives if only the ordeal does not last long but is soon over, with all looking on and applauding as though on stage. But active love is labor and fortitude, and for some people too, perhaps, a complete science."

This is a wonderful definition of Christian love. Very different than the view of love we often see in the culture.

We talked about this on Thursday morning at our Bible study communion service. Roger reminded us of these lyrics from the Musical My Fair Lady:

Sing me no song!
Read me no rhyme!
Don't waste my time,
Show me!
Don't talk of June,
Don't talk of fall!
Don't talk at all!
Show me!

If we remember that when Jesus talks of love, he is talking about loving action, the Gospel becomes clearer. 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.

This is not about loving or not loving, but about priorities, about moving away from love in dreams to love in reality.

But as much as we can try to make sense out of the Gospel, it reflects, by necessity, the tension that is part of being Christian believers and human beings: we want to do the right thing, but we want to do what we feel like. We want to belong, but we want to be alone, we want to lose weight, but we want to eat, we love our friends, partners spouses, except for when we hate them.

If life were only one thing, one feeling, one kind of experience we would lose interest in it very quickly.

Without the tension that we often feel as human beings, the mixed messages, the conflicting wants and need, we would become stagnant. We would stop growing, we would get complacent and static. We would miss out on the full profundity of what it means to be loved by God.

So, where is the solace in all of this? Where is the peace?

I suspect each of us will have our own answer to that question, each of us finds peace and joy in our own way, and it changes over time for each individual. But as complicated as things sometimes can seem, our tradition assures us that at the bottom of everything, at the end of everything, and at the center of everything is love, and love will in some mysterious way, make all things one.

So, as the Gospel passage say, do not be afraid, be open, be assured that there may be difficulties ahead, but there is also, always, more love to come, until that day when love is all there is.