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~ Matthew 10:24-39 ~

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Gospel reading:

"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 the one 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 [Creator].

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 [Parent] in heaven,

but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my [Parent] 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 [child-in-law] against [their parent-in-law],

and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

*"Whoever loves [a parent] more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves [a child] 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.*

Land Acknowledgement:

The ELCIC acknowledges that its buildings and ministries, from coast to coast to coast, are on traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples. I am speaking to you from Treaty One Territory and the Homeland of the Metis Nation. I am deeply grateful for the Indigenous elders, leaders and Peoples who are stewards of land, water and wisdom. The ongoing work of truth, healing, reconciliation and decolonization helps our society, our church, our communities and my family to address all the challenges we face.

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My name is Paul Gehrs. My pronouns are he/him. I serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Justice and Ecumenical and Interfaith relations with the ELCIC National Office.

Thank you for the invitation to offer this sermon today – along with the opportunity to honour June 21 as National Indigenous Peoples Day and to honour June 20 as World Refugee Day.

These observances are invitations to pray, listen, hear stories, learn history, honour people and celebrate identities. They are calls to be anti-racist. They are reminders to act for justice every day.

When I was in junior high school on a church youth retreat, I volunteered to help create a skit about Daniel in the lion's den. In the rehearsal, starring as Daniel and using my best and limited improv skills, I knelt down and prayed: "Dear God, I am very scared right now – surrounded by lions and all. But I know that you can help me and protect me."

And the youth leader serving as director said, "NO. Daniel was never scared because he believed in God."

It was an unnecessary stifling of imagination and a dubious theological conclusion.

In this mild confrontation, I experienced my usual pattern... withdrawal, guilt (it must be my fault there is a conflict), righteous indignation (I'm right and everyone else is wrong) and stewing about what I should try to say. For me, some of the big emotions, such as fear and anger, can be difficult.

What I did not manage to say to the director that day is that seeing biblical characters as human is an important step in theology. Imagining that Daniel is scared and faithful is a legitimate encounter with scripture. In my experience, the path to courage is most often through my fear and beyond my worries – rarely does God take away all the tough

emotions before the journey starts. Imagination is a gift; and leadership is not at its best when it stifles imagination or shuts down voices.

Today, we hear Jesus say, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword...” Uh-oh, sounds like conflict. I sense the same feelings churning inside: withdrawal, guilt, self-righteous anger and stewing.

Why is the Prince of Peace talking about swords? Here is how I make sense of it.

In grace and love, God bestows dignity on each person, values every part of creation, and honours each being. In baptism, we are called to be disciples of Jesus. This calling includes supporting each one in becoming the person God calls them to be. This calling includes working for justice, healing, liberation and peace.

I want to be a good disciple, but it is not always easy.

Action for grace and dignity can get you in trouble. As God moves the world toward justice, we don't all make the transformation at the same time. Those who benefit from oppression may be upset about the move to freedom. Doing the right thing may divide communities, families and households. You may even find yourself at odds with the very people who nurtured you, formed you and taught you.

This is one reason that Jesus says “I have come to bring a sword.”

On May 21, the Governing Board of the Canadian Council of Churches visited the [National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#) where the staff led us through a reflection exercise using the images of “Rose, Bud, Thorn.” Gathered for conversation in small groups, the idea is this:

Roses are the things where progress has been made on the work of reconciliation. Places where actions have born fruit and generated beauty.

Buds are opportunities. Situations where things have not yet bloomed but they are ready and inviting further action.

Thorns are things that block progress. We all know they exist. The thorny blocks happen inside me and in small communities and at the systemic level. Sometimes we are slow to name those thorns and speaking the truth can help discern other buds.

By way of example,

With regard to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, I could say that:

Some Roses are faith communities acknowledging Indigenous territory and improvements to how Canadian history is taught in schools.

Some Buds are continuing to learn how to respect and care for land and water from Indigenous elders and building on existing relationships in my life.

Thorns are laws, policies and projects that fail to respect the Indigenous Right to Free, Prior and Informed consent.

With regard to refugee rights:

Roses are Canadian Lutheran World Relief's (CLWR's) long history of care for refugees internationally and the work of congregations to sponsor refugees who come to Canada.

A Bud is that CLWR has recently hired Jennifer Ardon to serve in the new role of Public Witness & Mobilization Lead - Church Relations. Jennifer will be working with Lutherans to provide opportunities for learning and advocacy. A World Refugee Day toolkit has been posted on the CLWR website, and these engagement possibilities will be relevant long after June 20.

A thorn is how some public leaders are trying to blame refugees and immigrants for some of Canada's social problems such as housing and healthcare. This is inaccurate analysis and is a cloaked way of endorsing racism. We need leaders with imagination to address the issues of refugee rights and housing and healthcare.

One additional learning from my recent visit to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation:

There is no finish line for the work of reconciliation.

The work of truth, liberation, healing and reconciliation is an ongoing process of building relationships and restoring relationships.

Similarly, I could say that there is no finish line on the journey of discipleship. It is ongoing work of forming and healing relationships. The way is long and the burdens of world are legion. Jesus reminds us that swords will be part of the journey because speaking truth and acting for justice generate conflict. And Jesus promises to be with us in that conflict. Jesus blesses us with companions on the journey, and each one can carry part of the burden.

In response to the resurrection, the first disciples were full of fear and locked themselves behind closed doors. Jesus got through those locked doors and joined them and sent them. The Holy Spirit got through those locked doors with wind and fire – sending the disciples into the streets – full of passion and communicating in diverse languages.

Today and every day, we know that the Holy Spirit is going to move the church forward.

You are a gift to the world and for the world. The community needs your voice. The church needs your imagination. Creation needs your gentleness and wisdom. Those who are hurting need your care. Those who hunger and thirst for justice need your courage.

The invitation to follow Jesus has big metaphors:

Carry a cross. Lose your life. Discover the swords.

When I feel scared, overwhelmed, worried or discouraged, I remember this:

The Holy Spirit finds us, carries us, moves us, strengthens us and transforms us.

Jesus is our teacher and model for living out God's grace and unconditional love.

A disciple is not above the teacher...it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher...