

**Sermon for June 21 2026, Father's Day, 4th Sunday after Pentecost Yr A,
Matthew 10:24-39**

There's a crack developing in the continent of Africa. Now it's been there for a really long time - about 45 million years - but lately geologists have found evidence that the continent of Africa is actually splitting in two, with the eastern part being pulling away from the rest. Some of the stretched places between the two tectonic plates have gotten so thin - just 8 miles thick - that there's pretty much no way they will stay joined together. They've passed the point of no return. Two continents will exist, where there was just one.

Now this isn't something you'd be able to notice if you stare really hard at the cracks and valleys in the area - they're moving apart about an inch every 5 years - but in just a few more million years there will be a brand-new ocean in that break.

And most Bible scholars think that Jewish communities in the Roman Empire were going through something similar at the time that Matthew was writing his gospel. The churches Matthew was writing to had begun to be irreversibly broken off from the synagogues from which they'd sprung. Instead of a continental rift, Matthew's communities were experiencing a family rift. But why? It had to do with some really important ways that the new Christians related to Roman society, compared to the ways Jews had related to this occupying power.

The Romans for the most part were tolerant of Judaism as an really ancient faith. They allowed Jews to worship God the way they wanted to, so long as they promised to pray for the Emperor and make sacrifices on his behalf at the Temple in Jerusalem. Romans thought it weird that Jews didn't have any kind of physical representation of God, no statues or idols, but they were willing to live and let live.

But cities and towns in the Empire were nonetheless dead serious about honoring their local Roman gods and goddesses. Each community was dedicated to one or two particular deities and everyone in town was expected to honor them for the sake of the town's wellbeing. Failure to give enough honor might result in calamity coming to the town. So everyone, except maybe the Jews who did their own thing quietly, was expected to participate.

The trouble was, when members of Jewish synagogues and even Gentiles started to follow Jesus, well those folks weren't all about keeping their heads down and

staying quiet. They were overjoyed to share the good news that the Messiah had come, and had brought about the beginning of a brand new kind of society. The Jesus - followers were not keen on making sacrifices to the local deities. Compared to Jews who didn't follow Jesus, these folks really started to stand out. They started to come to the attention of local Roman leaders, which made their Jewish synagogue neighbors really nervous. Would the Jesus - followers make trouble for the Jews? Would they bring an end to the relationship of live and let live that had enabled the Jews to survive for so long? How dare these folks risk everything that the Jews had worked so hard to achieve for generations? Who can blame them for worrying about whether they'd be free to continue to worship without being messed with by the Romans?

That's probably the main source of the crack that developed between Jews and their Jesus-following sisters and brothers. Matthew's gospel was probably written as that crack was first starting to form. So Jesus as Matthew portrays him, he knows that this split is coming, and that it will be another reason why following Jesus comes with a cost. To be a Christian in the first or second century could mean broken relationships with one's home synagogue, if you were Jewish. It could mean ridicule in town, for not taking part in local religious rituals. It could mean getting kicked out your guild or trade group. And if you were living in the area around Rome during the reign of Marcus Aurelius or Emperor Decius, it could mean that confessing to being a Christian meant paying with your life. One of the reasons that early Christians made people wait a whole year before being allowed to join a church as a full member, was that they wanted to make sure these folks knew what they were getting into. What it might cost them.

And in this gospel text from Matthew, Jesus is helping folks realize that following him will have a cost. It'll bring uncountable good things, like joy and community, but there will also be a cost.

Some weeks ago, a few folks from St. Paul's and I heard a powerful presentation by an ELCA Lutheran pastor who shared what it like to grow up in Hungary while that country was under Soviet rule. She had been interested in God and faith since she was just a little girl. The Soviet government in Hungary was officially atheist, and so the culture considered people who believed in intangible things like God, and the afterlife to be foolish and backward. She said it was hard to be a young person willing to express one's faith openly, when most of the time that would get you laughed at. Even for her as a young girl, being a person of faith came at a cost.

But for adults, especially for people advocating for political change, for freedom or democracy, the stakes were much higher. Anyone who attracted the attention of the authorities for suspected activism was at risk of being arrested, tortured, often never seen again. And if you even thought about saying something critical of the Hungarian SSR government, you had to be very careful - strangers and neighbors could be informants, just waiting for a chance to turn someone in. I remember visiting relatives in Estonia as a kid, maybe 10 years old or so, and asking questions about why the lines were so long at the food stores and why there were so few options of what to buy. This was when Estonia was also part of the Soviet Union. My parents and relatives were quick to shush me, and they said, "Don't ask questions. You never know who's listening."

The pastor talked about how, after the Berlin Wall fell and there was no longer such a thing as the Soviet Union, she and her seminary classmates learned that one of their beloved theology professors had been an informant, someone who reported students and community members for their anti-Soviet words or actions.

They had the opportunity to confront him. They asked, "How could you call yourself a Christian, a man of faith, and turn on your own people in that way?" He shrugged and said, "They would've gotten someone else, if I hadn't done it. They would have had their man in their seminary. If it hadn't been me, it would've been someone else. Maybe someone worse."

And of course under the iron curtain, the deal of being an informant was offered with an "or else" - do this for us, or your family will be threatened. Do this for us, or your life will be threatened. In his place, what would any of us have done? Taken the job and done it with as much mercy and compassion as possible? Or refused, and found ourselves hauled off to a Russian labor camp, or worse - have family members disappeared in that way?

The pastor wasn't exaggerating. I have several Estonian relatives who disappeared into Soviet labor camps. My grandmother survived her years in a labor camp and did come back, although she was put under house arrest and never got to leave Estonia. What any of us have done, when faced with that impossible choice? It's not an easy question, and I don't think we can necessarily judge someone for choosing survival.

But as Jesus stood looking at that crowd, looking at his disciples, knowing the price they would pay for being his followers, he says: Don't give in. Refuse! Stand up for Me. Stand up for my words. Let them kill you. You might be afraid to die,

but your life won't end. Because your soul will live on. You will be fully alive, like I promised; where I am there you will be also. What a pep talk that must've been!

Jesus has 2 reasons for saying this, I think. One is that the church can't grow or even draw people in, without folks being willing to show that the love of God is *the most important thing*, period. That making that love known, is worth dying for. And the other reason he says this is that when we die we really will find out that our physical bodies were never meant to be permanent housing, but that who we truly are on the inside, who we've become by our life experiences and our choices, and especially who we are in Christ, it's that self we take with us into eternity. That self, claimed by God, destined to be healed and remade into the person God has always intended us to be, that self is forever.

Scary as Jesus' words sound, he says them to give *comfort* to his followers who are gonna face some really tough times. The worst any person can do is kill your body, - they can't kill your soul. And by the way, God who keeps your soul in life loves you so much that He knows all the hairs on your head. He knows your every movement, every thought, and loves you more than you are even capable of imagining. So don't be afraid. Jesus is offering us a life free from fear. Holds out his hand even as we're walking on the rough waves, even as we find ourselves sinking, and he says to us, "Don't be afraid. Just hold on to me."

What could you do, as you follow Jesus, if you were no longer afraid? If you weren't afraid of being criticized or thought foolish? What could you do if you knew that no matter what happens today or tomorrow God holds you close in love?

I confess to being a Harry Potter fan (although I don't agree with everything JK Rowling says). I love that the books are a parable of what it means to follow Jesus - especially the later books in the series. There's a point at which Harry comes to terms with the fact that he's probably gonna have to die, to defeat the evil Lord Voldemort who'd killed his parents and who has been terrorizing his friends and his community. But Harry faces this fact with courage. To save them, he's willing to die. He's scared, but he sees it's a price worth paying.

And after Harry has been killed in his battle against Voldemort, he finds that the love he's shown for his family and friends has made him whole and well, even on the other side of death. He has a vision of Voldemort after he's killed (by a different character) as a half-alive, fetus-like thing, caught in limbo between life and death.

And what I think author JK Rowling gets right is that the only things - and the only relationships - we take with us from this life to the next, are those we've built with love. Only love is forever so it's only love that builds our eternal selves, and it's only our relationships of love that we bring with us into our forever lives.

Voldemort didn't make any investments of love in his life, and in death he pays the price. But we have so many opportunities to invest in love, to - as Jesus says - store up treasure in heaven. That treasure is our future selves and the community we find when we get there.

Now I trust that God heals everyone who turns to Him, even after death. But still, why waste even a single opportunity to show love and compassion? What might you and I do differently, knowing that the only relationships and memories we truly get to keep forever, are those crafted in love? Let's take that risk, because Jesus has promised we don't have to be afraid. Amen.