

6.21.26 Sermon on Matthew 10:24-39

There are some days where I am less than enamored with what passages the Revised Common Lectionary offers us. Today is one of those days. I mean, what do we do with a passage where Jesus says that he has come to bring not peace, but a sword? When he speaks of divisions and hostilities? I'd much rather preach on a different passage – maybe one like "The Lord is my shepherd" or "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." These are the kinds of passages that make us feel kind of warm and fuzzy. But nope, that's not what we get today. Instead, we get "I have come not to bring peace, but a sword," and "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother" and "Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of being my disciple." These are uncomfortable and unsettling words and they can feel a bit out of place coming from the one we call the Prince of Peace. So what exactly are we supposed to do with a passage like this?

The temptation is to explain these words of Jesus away, to soften them, or to pretend Jesus did not really mean what he said. What we really need to do is sit with them long enough to understand what Jesus is actually saying, and also what he is not saying. This is a passage that requires us to understand the greater context in which it is located – without that, then it is possible to go really off the rails in our reading of Jesus' words. Matthew 10 is not a speech about violence, and it is not a call to war. It is not Jesus encouraging his followers to go out and create conflict wherever they can. If you recall last week, the chapter begins with Jesus sending the disciples out to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. And just before that, Matthew tells us that Jesus looked upon the crowds with compassion because they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Everything begins with compassion. The disciples are sent out to heal, to restore, and to embody God's kingdom, not to conquer or dominate.

But immediately after sending them, Jesus does begin to warn them about what lies ahead. He tells them that they will be rejected and persecuted. They will be dragged before governors and kings. They will be hated by many. And now, Jesus says, even families will be divided because of him. Why? Because whenever God's kingdom breaks into the world, it challenges the loyalties and values that already exist there. The conflict Jesus describes is not something the disciples are supposed to create. It is something that often happens when people begin living according to a different set of values than those embraced by the surrounding culture.

There is another detail here that Matthew's first readers would have recognized immediately, even if most of us completely miss it. When Jesus says, "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother," he is quoting the prophet Micah. Micah, who was a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah, lived during a time of deep corruption and injustice. The wealthy exploited the poor, leaders were dishonest, the courts were corrupt. Society had become so distorted that trust itself was beginning to break down between neighbors and even family members. In Micah chapter 7, the prophet laments that sons and fathers are divided, daughters rise against mothers, and enemies are found within one's own household. Micah is not celebrating division. He is grieving it. He is describing what happens when injustice becomes so pervasive that it poisons even the closest human relationships.

When Jesus echoes Micah here, he places himself squarely within Israel's prophetic tradition. The prophets were never popular. Amos challenged the wealthy, Jeremiah challenged kings, Nathan

confronted David, Elijah confronted Ahab. Over and over again, the prophets spoke God's truth into situations where people had become comfortable with injustice, and every time they did, conflict followed. It wasn't because the prophets loved conflict, but because truth has a way of afflicting the comfortable. That is what Jesus is preparing the disciples for. He does not tell them to go out with a combative posture. He tells them that faithfulness to the kingdom of God itself may create opposition. The conflict comes not because the disciples are seeking to "win" or to assert control, but because they are embodying a different vision of the world.

This same pattern appears throughout the Gospel of Matthew. King Herod responds to Jesus' birth with violence, and the religious authorities repeatedly challenge him. The Temple leadership sees him as a threat. Eventually, the Roman Empire crucifies him. Jesus is not introducing conflict into an otherwise peaceful world. He is exposing conflict that was already there – the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. He is unmasking the violence and injustice that is already present. The values of God's reign and the values of empire cannot be fully reconciled. One is rooted in mercy, justice, humility, and love. The other is rooted in domination, status, violence, and control.

All of this actually reminds me of a scene from Monty Python and the Holy Grail. King Arthur rides into a village and encounters a peasant, Dennis, who is part of a "anarcho-syndicalist commune." Dennis then begins criticizing the entire political system and does not recognize a king. As Arthur tries to assert his authority, the peasant shouts, "Help! Help! I'm being repressed!" Then the famous line: "Come and see the violence inherent in the system! Help! Help! I'm being repressed!"

The scene is funny because the peasant is pointing out something that everyone else is pretending not to notice. Arthur imagines himself as a noble king exercising legitimate authority, but the peasant sees the coercion and violence beneath the surface.

In many ways, Jesus does something similar throughout the Gospels. He pulls back the curtain. He reveals the violence hidden beneath the power systems and values of the world. He exposes the ways political power, religious authority, economic exploitation, and social exclusion wound human beings while claiming to preserve order. When Jesus heals on the Sabbath, or welcomes the outcast, or confronts religious hypocrisy, or challenges imperial claims, he is revealing that what many people call "peace" is really just a protection of the status quo, which was often maintained through systems that harm the vulnerable.

The cross itself becomes the ultimate unveiling. While Rome saw the cross as justice, by executing someone seen as a threat to the order of the empire and therefore society, Jesus exposes the cross for what it is: violence masquerading as order. The crucifixion reveals the world's systems in all their brutality. And the resurrection reveals that God refuses to let violence have the final word.

So when Jesus says he has not come to bring peace but a sword, he is not introducing violence into the world or commissioning his followers to use violence. The violence is already there. He is just exposing it. He is forcing his disciples, and us, to see what we would rather ignore. He is refusing to allow a false peace built on domination and exclusion to remain hidden beneath the ideas of "law and order."

This helps us understand what I think is the most difficult line in the passage: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." If we read that sentence by itself, it sounds shocking. But we know that later in this

same Gospel, when Peter draws an actual sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus commands him, "Put your sword back into its place, for all who live by the sword will die by the sword." This is not a call to violence. The sword that Jesus is referencing in Matthew 10 is a metaphor. It is the painful division that sometimes occurs when people are confronted with the claims of God's kingdom. It is like the sharp edge of truth cutting through our illusions and assumptions. It is what happens when God's reign collides with systems of domination, exclusion, exploitation, and injustice.

But I think we come to an important question now: if Jesus is the Prince of Peace, how can he say that he has not come to bring peace? The answer is that not all peace is the same. The Bible repeatedly distinguishes between true peace and false peace. The prophet Jeremiah condemned leaders who proclaimed, "Peace, peace," when there was no peace. Everything looked calm on the surface, but underneath, people were suffering. The poor were being exploited. The vulnerable were being neglected. Injustice continued unchecked. Yet those in power called it peace because the system was working exactly as intended for them.

Throughout scripture, God repeatedly disrupts that kind of peace. Moses disrupts the "peace" of Pharaoh's Egypt. The prophets disrupt the "peace" of corrupt kings. Jesus disrupts the "peace" of the Temple establishment. The apostles disrupt the "peace" of the Roman Empire. They disrupt this false peace, not because God loves conflict, but because God loves people too much to leave them trapped beneath injustice. Sometimes what we call peace is really just silence, or the absence of visible tension. Sometimes what we call peace is just a detached complacency that we might sometimes experience. Sometimes it is a demand that those who are suffering stop speaking about their suffering so everyone else can remain comfortable.

Today, we are observing Peace with Justice Sunday. Every year in the United Methodist Church, we celebrate this special Sunday because our tradition recognizes something that scripture teaches from beginning to end: there can be no lasting peace without justice. The peace the Bible envisions is not simply the absence of conflict. It is what the Hebrew scriptures call *shalom*, which means wholeness, flourishing, and right relationship. Shalom means a world where everyone has enough and where people are treated with dignity because they bear the image of God. It is a world where swords are beaten into plowshares and where no one is excluded, forgotten, or disposable.

But moving toward that kind of peace inevitably disrupts systems that benefit from injustice. Throughout history, those who seek justice have often been accused of disturbing the peace. Civil rights activists were accused of disturbing the peace. Union organizers were accused of disturbing the peace – in fact, I just learned about yet another telling moment in West Virginia's story – of the Bull Moose Special and the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike. The miners on strike were seen as disturbers of the peace, as ones disrupting the status quo, and so on the night of February 7, 1913, coal operator Quin Morton, Kanawha County Sheriff Bonner Hill and several railroad men and deputies armed themselves with rifles and a machine gun and rode an armored train called the "Bull Moose Special" through a tent colony of miners in Holly Grove where they opened fire from the train. Talk about the violence inherent in the system! Those who advocated for women's equality were accused of disturbing the peace. Today, those who challenge racism, poverty, anti-immigrant policies, attacks on LGBTQ people, or other forms of exclusion

are often told they are creating division. "Why can't you just stop talking about it?" "Why can't you just keep the peace?" Yet what is often called peace is really just the preservation of an unjust status quo.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood this well. In his Letter from Birmingham jail, he wrote that many people preferred what he called a "negative peace," which is merely the absence of tension, to a "positive peace," which is the presence of justice. Jesus seems to understand this deeply. The peace of God's kingdom is not passive. It is transformative. It heals and restores and liberates. And because it does those things, it often encounters resistance.

That is why Jesus concludes this passage by speaking about the cross. Long before the cross became a symbol of the Christian faith, it was an instrument of execution. To take up one's cross meant embracing a costly path. Jesus is telling the disciples that faithfulness may demand sacrifice – not because suffering is good or conflict is good, but because love and justice and truth are worth it. Peace and the flourishing of our neighbors are worth it. The kingdom of God is worth it.

The cross stands at the center of our faith because Jesus himself chose costly love over safe neutrality. He chose solidarity with the vulnerable over accommodation of the powerful. He chose faithfulness over comfort. And the resurrection reminds us that this kind of love is never wasted.

So maybe this passage leaves us with some questions for ourselves today: What kind of peace are we seeking? A peace that just avoids conflict? Or the deeper peace of God's kingdom? A peace that preserves the status quo? Or the peace that comes when justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream? The good news is that Jesus has not abandoned peace. Far from it. The Prince of Peace is still leading us. But he is leading us beyond the false peace of silence and submission and into the deeper peace of God's coming kingdom, which is a peace rooted in justice, in dignity, in truth, and in love. A peace worth carrying a cross for. Amen.