9.14.25 Sermon Transcript – Matthew 10:26-31

So yesterday afternoon, Darick and I participated in a worship service that the West Virginia Council of Churches does annually to remember the 55 victims of lynching in West Virginia. From sometime in the 1880s up through the 1930s, there were individuals who were lynched here in our state, in our own county. And so part of what we do during this service is to name the names, all of the names that we have. Some names have gone unknown, but they're beloved children of God. But we started looking at Howard Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited last week. This current sermon series is based upon his book Jesus and the Disinherited, and he was writing in the shadow of Jim Crow. And during the time of Jim Crow, lynchings were the ultimate threat. The fear of lynching was prominent and prevalent. Fear is one of the oldest and most powerful tools of oppression.

Howard Thurman wrote that fear is the first weapon that is used to keep the marginalized silent. Fear convinces people to stay small, to stay safe, to bow down, to give up dignity in order to survive. That's what it does. And we know what that feels like. Fear doesn't just live back then in the Roman Empire, in the time that Jesus was living, or in Howard Thurman's Jim Crow South. Fear still lives here in us, in our midst, in our society. Fear is in the air, in our own political rhetoric, in the polarization of our neighborhoods, in the escalation of violent words and violent acts. Fear gets in there and it gets a grip on us. And yet in Matthew 10, as we've heard this morning, Jesus looks his disciples straight in the eye and he says, “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.”

Howard Thurman helps us see that fear is never just an emotion, but that fear is a system. Fear is coercion. It's how the powerful keep the disinherited in line. For enslaved people, it was the whip and the auction block. In the Jim Crow era, it was the threat of lynching and other violence. For coal miners in company towns, it was the threat of eviction, of hunger, or even bullets for those who organized. fFor the disinherited back in Jesus’ day, it was the ever-present threat of the cross, which was Rome's symbol of execution, of humiliation, of trying to squash dissent. Fear corners people into silence. Fear shrinks our choices until obedience to empire seems like the only option. Fear doesn't ask for our hearts, but it does demand submission.

And this is why Jesus words in Matthew 10 are so radical. “Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” I mean, Jesus is not denying that the body can be harmed. We know that the body can indeed be harmed. But he's naming a truth that empire's coercion stops at the threshold of the soul it can never control entirely. Jesus reminds us, all of us, his disciples then and us today, that our worth, our dignity, our belovedness – those things are held by God and not by anyone else – not by Caesar, not by those who are calling the shots in our world today. They belong to God.

Matthew 10 – this whole chapter is often called the mission discourse of Jesus because in it he's commissioning his 12 disciples to go out and to continue his work. He gives them very practical instructions before the part that we heard today where he says, “Go to the lost sheep of Israel and proclaim the nearness of the kingdom, heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons.” And he says, “You're to travel lightly and you're to trust the hospitality of others.” But then he also warns

them about opposition that they're going to experience. He says, “You're going to face rejection and arrest and even betrayal by your own family members,” and that following Jesus and doing these things will bring them into direct conflict with religious authorities and with the imperial power of Rome. By the time we get to the verses that we heard this morning, the disciples, the disciples have just heard how much danger lies ahead for them.

Judea was under control of Rome and they maintained order through military power, through heavy taxation, through the terror of crucifixion. The Jewish leadership, the Pharisees and Sadducees and temple leaders were also entangled in that system of imperial power and often acted as mediators between Rome and the people. And Jesus’ movement threatened those religious and political systems. To follow Jesus also often meant estrangement from family networks, from kinship relationships which were the main source of identity, of protection, of livelihood. And so when Jesus is talking to the disciples here in this passage this morning, he's not giving some kind of abstract advice. He's saying, “This is going to be hard you are going to face opposition, you are going to face danger.” He's preparing his disciples for real life hostility rooted in empire, and fear, and coercion.

But as Jesus reminds us, if fear is the practice of coercion to keep people in place, then love is divinely expressed as the practice of invitation. Love doesn't manipulate, love doesn't intimidate, love doesn't shrink down the soul. Love says, “You are seen, you are known, and you are of more value than the sparrows who are still so deeply cared for.” And so Jesus doesn't just tell his disciples not to fear, but he actually invites them into a new reality where their whole understanding of themselves and their call and their dignity are reframed. It's a reality where their voice matters, where their dignity is indeed secure, and where they can speak what has been whispered in the dark and proclaim it from the rooftops. When fear is coercive, love is invitational. Fear demands silence, but love creates freedom to speak. Fear tightens that fist, but love opens and extends the hand.

This week, maybe like some of you, I've been thinking a lot about fear and violence and the way in which it just permeates our society. It feels so heavy. I feel like I'm constantly walking around with this low level of anxiety in my body where I feel like I can't settle myself. I'm having a hard time sleeping because I just can't shrug off that feeling of dread and fear that feels like it's enmeshed in my very body. I'm worried about what's going to happen next in our world, in our society. I've seen so many different calls to escalate violence, of demonizing others. It seems to be the knee jerk reaction for so many. We're fearful, so we want to find somebody to blame for what's going wrong. And then we perpetuate that violence in word and sometimes also in action. So it's weighing on me very heavily. How do we as people of faith, faith deal with this? How are we supposed to find our way?

This is where I think a theologian named Walter Wink helps us out some. And I did a little bit of writing about him earlier in the week. He names what he calls the “myth of redemptive violence.” It's the oldest story in the world. It's the idea that somehow violence saves us and that order comes through destruction. That peace can only be achieved when we can finally like crush our enemies. It shows up in ancient myths from the Babylonian Enuma Elish. It shows up in Hollywood

movies today. It shows up sometimes in Saturday morning cartoons, and it certainly shows up in our political rhetoric that we hear today. But that myth of redemptive violence is the belief that killing is somehow what saves us.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ unmasks that myth. On the cross, Rome did its worst, and the resurrection revealed its bankruptcy. Violence did not redeem. Fear did not silence. But ultimately, love had the final word. We really don't have to look very far to see this myth at work. All we got to do is look at the news.

This past week, in the wake of Charlie Kirk's assassination, fear and violence are heavy in the air around us. Fear and violence have once again been paraded as the answer. I want to take a minute and be honest. Charlie Kirk's words inflicted very real harm on people. He used his platform to stoke fear, to dehumanize immigrants, to target LGBTQ people, to mock the vulnerable.
And we cannot pretend like his words were harmless. And yet the violence that ended his life is not redemption in any sense. His death does not heal the wounds that his rhetoric created. Instead, it has deepened the polarization. It has escalated violence, and some voices are using this horrific assassination to justify more violent rhetoric, to double down on this fear, to claim that only stronger weapons or a harsher response to will keep us safe. But that's Empire's way. That's not the way of Jesus. That is the myth of redemptive violence in full display – violence does not save. It multiplies. Fear does not heal. It corrodes.

In this moment, I believe that Jesus' words break light into darkness. "Do not fear. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Do not let fear be your master. Do not believe the lie that killing an enemy can somehow create peace. Do not be silenced by coercion or seduced by vengeance. Instead, Jesus calls us to live as those who are beloved, as people who can proclaim that boldly, as people who should be standing with the vulnerable. I think Jesus calls us in this moment to root ourselves in the God who sees the sparrows and who counts the hairs on our heads. So what does it mean to practice love as invitation rather than being caught up in fear?

I think love invites us to listen deeply to one another. Fear tells us to shut people out or to shut them down, but love creates a space to listen – not to excuse harmful rhetoric – but to understand what drives people's fears. Practicing love as invitation means saying, "Your story matters and my story matters. I want to hear you and I want you to hear me."

Love invites us to speak truthfully. Invitation doesn't mean silence. It doesn't mean passivity. Jesus says, "What I tell you in the dark, speak it in the light." And so love calls us to name racism, nationalism, exclusion, violence, all of those things. Honestly. The difference is that truth spoken in love does not seek to humiliate or destroy, but to awaken and to heal.

Love invites us to build community. The divisions that we see in our world today, they isolate, they separate. But love gathers. In practice, this means creating tables, creating spaces, small groups where people of difference can in fact, belong, not because they agree on everything, but because God sees them as beloved. And even if maybe you're not ready to sit down at a physical space with somebody who holds a differing view than you, maybe it's even about making a space in your

own heart to where you can pray for them, to where you can see them as a human being. Enacting hospitality. Creating that space is an act of resistance.

In a culture of fear, it's saying, “I'm not afraid. I am not afraid.” Love invites us into courage. Fear says, stay safe, stay small, don't risk anything. But love says, “Step out, even when you're trembling.” Invitation means calling people to have courage together, whether it's standing with those who are most vulnerable, like with immigrants at a hearing, or supporting LGBTQ youth, or resisting harmful policies. It means being courageous together.

Love also invites us beyond either/or thinking. Polarization and fear thrive on binaries, the us versus them. You either win or you lose. It's that zero sum game. You're either a friend or you're an enemy. But love as an invitation creates a third way, refusing to mirror the hatred of those we might see as opponents, but also refusing to minimize harm. It's complicated to understand what that might look like when we seek to live it out. I invite you to read Walter Wink on the Third way. We may talk about that more down the line, but this kind of love that invites us beyond false binaries of either/or thinking asks, “What is God's way of seeing this other person? And how
How can I?” How can we respond without being trapped by the script that fear provides for us? There is indeed another script. Love invites us into God's perspective. Jesus says, even sparrows are seen, even hairs on heads are counted.

And to practice love as invitation means living out God's view, seeing things the way God sees them. I love this phrase, “living out God's gaze, not empire's threats.” We are called to be a community that invites all to know their own belovedness, and that to be a part of beloved community means that we are a community compelled, drawn, inspired by the love, the invitational love of Christ, rather than through coercive fear. Fear coerces us into silence or even violence, but love invites us into courage, to truth, and into community. And in this polarized time, love does not mean avoiding conflict. It means opening up space where dignity is affirmed, where truth is spoken and God's belovedness is made real.

Fear is the weapon of empire, but love is the way of the kingdom. Fear coerces, but love invites. Fear silences. Love gives voice. Fear destroys. Love redeems.

So in this moment of fear, of polarization and of escalating violence, the question for the church is what practice will we embody? Will we join in the chorus of fear, which is singing very loudly and at times it is extremely tempting to join in with that chorus. Or. Or will we proclaim with our lives the good news, the gospel, that God's love has already cast out fear? The world is desperate, our society is desperate for people who will resist fears, coercion, and live into love's invitation. This, this is our call, this is our witness, and this is our hope. Amen.