

## NOT PEACE, BUT A SWORD

Matthew 10:24-39

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on June 22, 2008, Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*'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 unperceived by 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.*

In 1997 and 1998, I faced a major vocational crisis. A group of people in the church I was serving at the time became disenchanted with the way I was leading the congregation. Over the course of a few months, tension grew; conflict long simmering beneath the surface broke out into the open. Through I had been a minister for seventeen years and had been at that particular church for seven years, I knew that if the dissatisfaction was widespread, I would need to seek another call. That prospect scared both my pride and my pocketbook.

While fear and pride were part of my motivation in responding to that crisis, I was also motivated by a strong belief – a sense of call – that the church needed a minister to “stick-it-out” and not leave at the first sign of duress. I vowed to myself that as long as I felt that God was calling me to remain in place, I would stay with the congregation through the resolution of the conflict.

It took about two years for the tension to be addressed and resolved. It was difficult on everyone. Some of the people who were critical of my leadership left the church; some changed their minds about my leadership; and some took a back seat. Through a lot of hard work, prayer, and soul-searching on the part of many, we addressed the tension and eventually resolved it.

I remained pastor of the church for seven more years, during which time we undertook and completed a renovation similar in scale to the renovation we completed here in 2007. Then I accepted the call to Westminster.

Weathering that storm was the hardest thing I have ever done in my professional life, and it is the thing of which I am most proud. By staying in that pulpit, I learned more about myself than I can express, and I am a better minister, and a more humble human being, because of it. Staying is what I needed to do. It is what God was calling me to do. I am grateful for that call and for that congregation for what I learned in my relationship with them.

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I share this story with you because it is the situation in my life in which I most experienced the teachings of Christ that are before us in our lectionary passage for today.

When Jesus says: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” he is reminding us that when we do what we believe we have to do, when we do what we believe is God’s will for us in a given situation, we will sometimes face criticism, suffering, threats to soul if not to body as well.

Though Christ was born to bring “peace on earth” and “good will” among all,<sup>1</sup> he also brings “not peace, but a sword.” At some point in our lives, we may experience more the latter than the former.

- In our family
- In our work or professional life
- In our community
- In our involvement in politics
- In our involvement in church

it is simply a fact of life – and of Christian discipleship – that in doing the right thing, we often face criticism, opposition, conflict. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

## II.

To be sure, it is not always the case that we *know* what we have to do, that we are certain about what Christ is calling us to do. In fact, we can spend hours, days, months searching, reading, talking to others, praying, gnashing our teeth, trying to determine what the Spirit of God is leading us to do in a given situation. But when clarity dawns upon us, when we are given as clear a sense as we ever have as mortals about what God is leading us to do, then the teachings of Christ we have just heard – including the hard saying “not peace but a sword” – can speak to us in profound ways.

Let me briefly suggest six things Christ is teaching us in this passage:

### (a)

First, there is a transcendent purpose to the cause for which Christ calls us. The cause for which we stand is larger than we who do the standing.

In the opening verses of this passage, Jesus reminds his disciples that when they are “malign[ed]” and referred to as “the evil one,” they are receiving epithets that are actually aimed at Christ. By extension, he is saying that when we stand for something that we believe is truly God’s will, the cause for which we stand is more important than what happens to us.

There must be a transcendent purpose to the cause for which we stand; otherwise, we are simply standing for our pride, our ego – not the overriding will of God.

### (b)

Second, when we do what we believe God is calling us to do, we can trust that truth will eventually prevail.

“Nothing is covered that will not be uncovered,” Jesus says. “Nothing [is] secret that will not become known.”

As hard as, in the midst of battle, for us to believe that the truth will come out; as much as we have to suffer personally until it does; as often as we may not even be around when the truth comes out; we can rightly believe that truth will ultimately prevail; and our suffering will not be in vain.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:14.

(c)

Third, when we do what we have to do, when we do what we believe God is calling us to do, no one can take our integrity from us. To those who stand up and suffer in his name, Jesus says: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear [those] who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

What I went through over a decade ago did not involve bodily threats, though I have known clergy who have suffered such for doing what they believe; and there are certainly other professions where doing the right thing brings physical danger daily. But what Jesus is promising is that when we do what God is genuinely calling us to do, no one can take that calling from us. No one can destroy our soul. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...”

(d)

Fourth, when we do what we believe God is calling us to do, no matter the cost, we experience a tremendous intimacy with God.

“Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven....” says Jesus.

We may hear these words as some kind of heavenly reward for our earthly sacrifice, and perhaps that involved in this promise, but what Jesus points to here is also something we experience on earth.

- Acknowledgment by God
- Recognition by God
- Understanding by God.

To know ourselves acknowledged before God is to experience a tremendous closeness with the Holy One. When do we have to do, when we do what we genuinely believe God is calling us to do, we come about as close as we ever come in this life to intimacy with the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

(e)

Fifth, this closeness we experience with God sometimes shatters a closeness we have within our families. In some of the hardest words of Christ to hear, Christ says to us:

...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.

These are not words of domestic bliss. They are not words of familial harmony. They are not words of “family values.” They are hard and difficult words; and they are sad: “One's foes will be members of one's own household.”

One of the great spirituals found in this country is called “Change My Name.” It goes like this:

I told Jesus it would be all right  
if he changed my name.  
I told Jesus it would be all right  
if he changed my name...

Jesus told me that the world would  
be against me if he changed my name.  
Jesus told me that the world would  
be against me if he changed my name.  
But I told Jesus it would be all right...  
if he changed my name.

Jesus told me I would have to work for justice  
if he changed my name.  
Jesus told me I would have to work for justice  
if he changed my name.  
But I told Jesus it would be all right,...  
if he changed my name.<sup>2</sup>

When we do what God is truly calling us to do, we sometimes have to put that call

- Above domestic tranquility
- Above parental responsibility
- Above marital harmony
- Above our acceptance of God's commandment to "honor our father and mother."<sup>3</sup>

"I told Jesus it would be all right if he changed my name."

(f)

Sixth, doing what God calls us to do is the only real way to find and affirm life. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Doing what we have to do is the most life-affirming thing we can do.

This past week my wife and I made a quick stop at the new Air Force Memorial. Among many words etched in granite alongside the Missing Man Formation of the memorial are these from Sergeant Carl Goldman, US Army Air Forces, World War II, B-17 Gunman, killed in action over Western Europe, from a letter to his parents:

...am going on a raid this afternoon...  
there is a possibility I won't return...  
do not worry about me  
as everyone has to leave this earth  
one way or another,  
and this is the way I have selected.  
If after this terrible war is over,  
the world emerges a saner place...  
pogroms and persecutions halted,  
then, I'm glad I gave my efforts  
with thousands of others for such a cause.

The heading above these words is "Sacrifice." Even when doing what we have to do leads to death, in a more ultimate sense it leads to life.

### III.

To summarize: When we do what we believe God is calling us to do, even when it causes us to suffer, we are likely to experience some or all of the following:

- The transcendence of serving a cause greater than ourselves
- Assurance that truth that will be eventually prevail
- Protection for our soul though not always our bodies
- Closeness with God
- Estrangement from family
- Affirmation of life.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.spiritandsong.com/musicondemand/songs/65287>.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:12.

I want to close with a poem from Mary Oliver that is consistent with the teachings of Christ on this noble but sobering subject. Her poem is called “The Journey.”<sup>4</sup>

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began.  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice--  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do--  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Available on many websites, including <http://www.allspirit.co.uk/maryoliver.html#journey>.

<sup>5</sup> I am aware that the final line of this poem seems to contradict the call to sacrifice inherent in other parts of the sermon, though I would argue that it does not stand in absolute conflict; but that is another discussion and another sermon. I simply chose in this sermon to let the poem stand in hopes that people would get both the determination, the sense of call, and the opposition in “the journey.” The reality is that sometimes, we are called to save our own life in a particular situation, and that that calling involves as much opposition and suffering as other outwardly more noble pursuits. – LRH.