

Southport Presbyterian Church

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May 24, 2009

Whom Shall I Fear?

Matthew 10:28

I was asked some years ago, while doing youth ministry at a church in Oregon, to speak at another church's senior high ski retreat. I agreed, but as the time got closer, I began to fear the response of this large group of high school students that I didn't know and who didn't know me. I was so fearful by the time of my first talk that I wasn't relaxed and didn't do as well as I could have. I remember having fun skiing, but I think my talks and relationships with the kids suffered because fear and insecurity had gripped me and I couldn't seem to shake it.

Fear is one of the most common human emotions and one mentioned often in Scripture. Fear motivates us to do all sorts of things, many of them regrettable. Of course fear sometimes helps us and others, as when we're afraid to walk across a busy street without a walk signal, or that young children might get hurt if we let them get near an open flame. So fear is a mixed bag, sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful.

Fear of other people is the biggest problem we face regarding this unpleasant emotion. And fear of people is the single biggest problem for disciples of Jesus as he sends them into the world to witness to the kingdom of God at hand. **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” Jesus tells them. “Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell”.** (Matthew 10:28) Now this advice might sound over the top. So it would help to ask ourselves: Why did Jesus say this, and what did he mean? And what in the world does it have to do with *us*?

To get what Jesus was driving at, it will help to see the bigger picture. Jesus gives this counsel about fear in a sermon on mission. Already Jesus has given a sermon on discipleship, what we call “The Sermon on the Mount.” Now he's teaching about the flip side of discipleship, which is the mission of helping others become his disciples, his student-apprentices who are learning to live within the sphere of life where God's will is constantly sought and increasingly being done. Here's how Matthew describes the scene:

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town”. (Matthew 10:1-15)

Jesus has been training disciples who are learning life from him. Now he sends them to do just what he has been doing with them and others. They will have Jesus' authority to heal, to free people from the power of the evil

one, and to spread deep well being wherever they go. And the announcement they are to make about all of this is that it is a manifestation or sign of God's invading reign. This is what God wants done among people who are hurting and who need help, which means all people.

But did you notice that Jesus is already aware, and he wants his friends to be aware, that not everyone will receive them or the one whose intentions and purposes they are carrying out. Not all will go well. Jesus is realistic about that, and we should be too. In fact, listen to just how realistic Jesus really is about the mission he's sending them, and by extension us, into:

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” (Matthew 10:16-23)

Like sheep in the midst of wolves. Not exactly reassuring, is it? But it's honest, and that's worth a lot.

I once heard a conversation between Bill Hybels, the pastor of one of the largest churches in the world, and Dallas Willard, someone Bill respects immensely. Bill wanted to know how much Dallas thought we should tell people about the difficult parts of following Jesus when we are first inviting them to turn their lives over to Jesus' saving leadership. Should we tell them about the possibility of losing friends, or risking job security because of a new commitment to truthfulness? Yes, Willard said, we should tell them those things.

Hybels, though, seemed to be fishing for a different answer, so he upped the ante. What if I were a Christian living in the first century, and had a Roman friend who'd never heard of Jesus. So that friend wouldn't know that becoming a Christian put you at risk of being thrown to the lions. Should I tell him about the lions, or wait until he'd grown into the faith for a while before mentioning that part? “You should tell him about the lions,” Willard answered.

Now, like Hybels appeared to feel at first, you may feel that's going too far. But what else is Jesus doing when he says, “Look, I'm sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves”? They're going to drag you before the officials, flog you with whips, persecute you, he tells them. “Beware of people,” Jesus warns. But isn't this, as my old West Coast friends would say, a total bummer? Isn't Jesus being a bit too pessimistic? Chin up, Jesus. Look on the bright side. Look for the best in people.

Jesus, thankfully, knows better than that. People can be wonderful, but not always, and he can see as much. More to the point, he has experienced what he's talking about, and he appeals to that experience so that they will know they're not alone in being resisted:

“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!” (Matthew 10:24-25)

Jesus is a realist about what will happen when people follow him into everyday life. And he wants us to be ready for what we'll go through. He's actually doing something very kind in telling about the lions, about the

malice and unkindness of people. He's not trying to discourage them. He wants his disciples to be prepared mentally and emotionally so they *won't* get discouraged.

And notice that he never promises success. Beware not only of those who will resist the coming of God's rule in this world and into their lives. Beware also of those in the church who promise effectiveness and success in ministry and mission. A good reality check regarding all this is Ruth Tucker's outstanding book on the history of Christian missions entitled *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. It's a goldmine of honest insights about what missionary life is really like, in all its glory—and there is much that is glorious—and also in its disillusionments and frustrations and even failures—and there is a fair amount of those things as well.

It's no fun being slandered like Jesus was when people linked him with evil. It hurts and can be a shock to the system. Jesus knows that, and wants us to know it too. He wants us to remember what he went through so we won't feel abandoned when we experience similar things. And that is very gracious indeed. And not only can we look back on his story to draw fresh courage, but we may look ahead knowing that God will set wrongs to right. "So," Jesus says,

“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 apart from 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”.
(Matthew 10:26-31)

And here is where today's advice shows up. We are not to fear people, who can hurt us for a time. We are instead to fear God, who can sentence us permanently.¹ And yet, in fearing God we are immediately reminded of God's character. He cares about even the tiniest details of our lives, like the hairs on our heads.

And note especially what Jesus says about sparrows. Not one of them will fall to the ground “apart from your Father.” They do fall to the ground, of course, just as disciples will at times be despised and slandered and persecuted. But our heavenly Father accompanies the sparrow, and he is with us too. What's more, Jesus will put in a good word for us with our heavenly Father as a result of our willingness to stand up for him and his way of life right where we are, as hard as that can be. As he says,

“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”. (Matthew 10:32-33)

Let's be clear about this. Jesus isn't saying that if we don't forward someone's email to everyone we know, he'll turn his face away from us in disgust. That is spiritual manipulation, playing on our fear of rejection. What Jesus is talking about here is far more important, and far more challenging, than forwarding email. He's talking about the way we speak and act when we're around other people in the normal situations of everyday life, some of which are truly difficult.

As Dale Bruner points out, “More often than we realize we are called upon to stand up for Jesus in front of other people... Standing up for Jesus... combines both faith in and love for God . . . Each of us has opportunity every day either to deny Jesus or to stand up for him by making moral decisions in accordance with his Word. (In relation to sex and money, men and women confess Jesus as much by what they do and decide as by what

¹ I am indebted to Dale Bruner's Matthew commentary for this wording and for several of the insights on this sermon on mission, including the insight about God's accompaniment of the falling sparrow in the next paragraph.

they say.) Almost every human encounter gives the opportunity, either ethically or evangelistically (and the two are often intertwined, as the Sermon on the Mount teaches), to stand up for Jesus.”²

We often define the gospel and its effects far too narrowly. We confine the gospel to good news about forgiveness of past sins and about eternal life after death. But that leaves out the time in between, which is our life right now, where we work and play, raise families and vote for government officials, eat and sleep and interact with those around us. Yet the biblical gospel is equally about life now and God’s kingdom among us in the present moment, with the goal of God directing every aspect of our life. All our thoughts about every topic we must deal with in our homes, at work, at the mall, in the movies, on TV, over the radio, among friends at Starbucks, at the racetrack—all of it comes under the influence of God’s reign, God’s effective will. This is exactly what Jesus taught us to pray for: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth just as in heaven.”

We far too often and too easily just “go along” with the ideas and plans of people. We find ourselves trying to “go with the flow” so that we “fit in” and don’t “stand out like a sore thumb.” When we do so, we are trying to avoid the powerful weapon of shame, which is what peer pressure uses among all age groups.

Like the old Anita Bryant commercial that said “Orange juice isn’t just for breakfast anymore,” peer pressure and the subtle technique of shaming aren’t just for kids on the playground anymore. In fact they never were. Shame has always been a powerful tool to get people in any age group to conform to the “rules” about what we can and cannot say or can and cannot do. It works because the basic human instinct is to want friends not enemies, to want people to like us not hate us.

We all know what this is like. Coworkers are eating lunch together and gossip about another coworker starts up. What will happen if you speak up in defense of that person or ask the group to change the subject? Or a friend jokes about cutting corners on his taxes and expects you to laugh along with him. What would happen if you don’t laugh, if instead you tell him he needs to make good on it? Or some friends at school all make fun of a kid nobody likes. What if you start sitting with that kid at lunch? Can anyone seriously doubt that is what Jesus would want us to do in those situations? But fear of what others will think or say about us holds us back. We don’t want to rock the boat, at least not the one we’re in.

In fact, Jesus knows about that fear in us, and so he comes at it one final time in this sermon on mission, on our responsibilities and calling as his followers in this world.

“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”. (Matthew 10:34-39)

In an article about what the sixteenth-century reformers like Luther and Calvin can teach us, church historian Ann White describes what could almost be a commentary on these words of Jesus. “The Bible shows us . . . that Christian witness does not bring peace. In fact, the conflict Jesus faced stand at the heart of the Scriptures. Jesus could have bypassed Calvary. Instead, he chose to engage with his enemies among the religious leaders and to move toward the awful violent conflict of Calvary. From the beginning, our faith has not been a faith of quiet peacefulness.

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary, Vol. 1, The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 486.

“A sixteenth-century Strasbourg woman, Katherina Schutz, put herself in the line of fire when in 1523 she married one of the first Reforming ministers, Matthew Zell. Middle class and with a German education, Katherina read Luther and studied the Bible. She understood how the marriage of the clergy followed logically from the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. But to most of her contemporaries the idea of a married clergyman was strange

“Katherina Schutz Zell did not shrink from the opprobrium and conflict that came with her marriage. She met it head on, writing a spirited and profoundly biblical defense of her husband and of their marriage. She lived in a swirl of conflict for the rest of her life.

“It is good for us to meditate on the contrast between how deeply we want people to like us and Jesus utterly alone at Calvary, with no one offering a good opinion of him. To the people of the first Reforming generations, like Katherina Schutz Zell, the necessity and pain of the conflict revealed in the Bible—conflict that engulfed prophets, apostles, Jesus himself—was real: it illumined their own reality of ceaseless conflict. Calvin was hounded by political opponents. Argula von Grumbach was jailed at age 70 because she persisted in organizing evangelical worship and teaching the Bible. Thomas Cranmer, author of the *Book of Common Prayer*, was burned to death by English authorities...

“At the beginning of his Reforming efforts, Luther was threatened with death. Until the end of his life, he was constantly criticized, both by Roman Catholics and by other reformers. He set down the condition plainly and biblically: ‘The Word of God comes to change and renew the world. This cannot happen without commotion and upheaval, and often without bloodshed.’”³

Of course what we end up with if we bow in fear to what others think of us is a life that simply cannot cooperate with God’s transformative influence in our world. Jesus sends out ambassadors precisely because he wants to change people and situations, and he can only do that through us when we increasingly live the way he wants and empowers us to live.

What Jesus knew is this: his friends and followers would be frightened by the angry, mocking, shaming responses of other people. They would feel like caving under the pressure to conform. They would cringe when people called them names and ridiculed them, and they would feel awful knowing that people didn’t like them.

So Jesus makes one final appeal to his friends and followers to diminish the sting of rejection. He assures them that some people will appreciate their witness to him and will respond gladly to their different way of life, and a new community of Jesus followers will emerge and be blessed with good things forever.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward”. (Matthew 10:40-42)

If you want to truly live within the kingdom of God, within that sphere of life where what God wants and decides is what increasingly happens, then your whole way of thinking about life will be very different in many respects from the people around you. You *will* stick out like a sore thumb at times. You will *not* just go with the flow in every situation. You will *not* fit in all the time. And God won’t rescue you from the negative reactions of other people, from their attempts to shame you ever so subtly or even in obvious ways. But God will be with you, and he will set things right in the long run. And along the way, some people are going to turn out to be eternally grateful for your faithfulness to our Lord. Jesus promises it, and that is a very good promise indeed.

³ Ann White, “The Reformers Teach Us About Thinking, Praying, Living,” *Theology Matters*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Mar/Apr 2009), 3-4.

Let me close with what I consider a fitting prayer for disciples turned disciple-makers, which is what I think Jesus has in mind for each one of us. It's a prayer that all of us would do well to turn to from time to time, and it's found in our Bibles as **Psalm 27**:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh— my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.

Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!