

The Courage of Discipleship

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 10:24-39 (NRSV)

"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; [25] 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!

[26] "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. [27] What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. [28] 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. [29] Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. [30] And even the hairs of your head are all counted. [31] So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

[32] "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; [33] but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

[34] "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

[35] 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;

[36] and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

[37] 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; [38] and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. [39] Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

SACRIFICE FOR GOLF

Monday afternoon I watched Tiger Woods win the US Open golf tournament with a double stress fracture and torn ligaments in his left leg. Essentially he was able to win the toughest golf tournament in the world on one leg. He knew what he was doing. Tiger's doctors told him that not only should he not play the US Open; he should be at home on crutches.

Tiger responded, "I'm going to play, and I'm going to win the US Open." There are some who have said that this was a terrible decision. Why sacrifice your future for the sake of just one tournament? Why put so much emphasis on a game?

Logically, those people would be right. But, if you are going to be successful in any athletic endeavor, you have to be stubborn and single minded. When Tiger Woods was a child he had Jack Nicolas' tournament record posted on his door. His whole life was dedicated to surpassing that record and becoming the greatest golfer who has ever lived.

Tiger's father certainly pushed him in that direction. He made sure that he was mentally tough and trained hard. The whole family made sacrifices to further his goal to be the world's greatest golfer.

And the golfing world has been captivated by this golfer's success. TV ratings go up when Tiger is playing, and they drop dramatically when he is out of the field. People are captivated by the story of a person who is this talented and is willing to work this hard. We recognize something special in Tiger's willingness to work so hard and try his best on every shot ... no matter what the circumstances.

In my mind this is why many of us like sports. Competition is more than just hitting a ball with a stick. It is a morality play, a place where we can appreciate (as the used to put it on ABC's Wide World of Sports) the "thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

Those of you who are not sports fans may not understand this, but you probably do understand the need for sacrifice in other areas. I remember John F. Kennedy's book, *Profiles in Courage*. These are the stories that inspire us, the people who are willing to sacrifice for some great cause.

Having the courage to sacrifice is a part of the American way of life. We lift up those who have the courage to give up everything for a cause ... whether that cause is great or small ... except when it comes to the life of faith.

FAITH WITHOUT SACRIFICE?

Why is it that we can talk about the importance of sacrifice in sports, in politics and in military service, and yet when it comes to our faith even the smallest sacrifice is rejected?

Religion, according to the modern world should be therapeutic. We used to sing, "Give me that old time religion." Now we sing, "Give me that hot tub religion!"

We have embraced the idea that we can follow Jesus without getting hurt. Christians have been re-defined as sensitive, compassionate caring Americans. And Jesus is defined as the one who keeps our families together, supports our institutions, and confirms our best values.

Unfortunately Jesus just won't let us get comfortable in our hot tub. Over and over again the cost of discipleship is emphasized in the gospels. The greatest proponent of this view of course was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who actually died at the hands of the Nazis rather than compromise his Christian faith.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer wrote, "The cross is God's sword on this earth. It creates division." The cross is the specter of fearful sacrifice, the ominous thought that we could lose everything if we dare to follow Jesus. This is a very hard truth for us to hear. We would like to believe that there could be some other way than the way of sacrifice.

And as we have noted so many times, the first disciples felt the very same way. They wanted to find another way, a more positive and victorious way.

I think that the choir's medley this morning illustrates the subtle shift in theology in the past few years. Our praise and worship song focused entirely upon the power and might of God. Our God is a mighty God, he reigns in heaven above.

That's all true of course. But, how has this mighty God revealed himself here on earth? He has revealed himself in the man Jesus who was crucified by people he loved. God reveals his love through the cross, through a willingness to sacrifice and endure pain.

And the question that was upon the mind of the man who wrote the classic hymn of faith was "Must Jesus bear the cross alone?" Is the cross just a sacrifice for Jesus to make? Do we get to go free? In 1693 Thomas Shepherd knew too much about the Scripture to make that mistake. The second line of that hymn tells us, "No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me."

That proved to be true for Thomas. In order to proclaim what he felt was the true gospel of Jesus he felt compelled to leave the Church of England and preach independently in much more meager circumstances.

This has been the hard, inescapable truth that every generation of Christians has had to learn. There's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me. Following Jesus requires sacrifice. Following Jesus requires courage.

FEAR AND FAITH

Where can we find the courage to follow Jesus? How can we learn to bear the cross? How can we learn to take risks for the faith instead of making decisions on the basis of safety first last and always?

Jesus tells us that we need to overcome our fear. Fear is the big enemy of faith. Three times in today's passage Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid. (vv. 26, 28, 31). And yet, when I look at what is happening in the lives of those early disciples I think, "How could they not be afraid?"

Jesus has just told them that they will be like sheep in the midst of wolves. They will be flogged and arrested. They will be betrayed by family members. They will be hated by everyone. And yet Jesus tells them not to be afraid!

In the gospel of Matthew fear is an important theme. Fear controls not only the disciples of Jesus but also the enemies of Jesus. For example, Herod doesn't execute John the Baptist because he is afraid of the crowd's reaction (14:5). The chief priests and elders want to arrest Jesus, but they don't because they fear the crowds (21:26)

Fear is also an important theme in our own world. How many actions are taken by nations and their leaders out of fear? How many times do we fail to try something new or say what we know it the truth because we are afraid of what might happen?

Fear often controls our words and our actions

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that our fear is unwarranted. In many cases our fears are justified. We live in a dangerous world. There are many things that we should rightly fear. It's no wonder that we often try to turn the Christian faith into something that it is not, a panacea that takes away all our fears and solves all our problems.

But, discipleship just doesn't work that way. Take it from Jesus. When we follow Jesus we will be rejected. Some will say that we're the devil. Some will try to shut us up. They did it to Jesus. They will do it to his disciples.

So if you're following Jesus to make things go more smoothly, you can leave right now. It just won't happen. True discipleship often results in conflict. And it is quite normal for us to be afraid when there is conflict and danger. It is quite normal for us to want to run away or hide our head in the sand when there are inconvenient truths that we would rather not face.

THE PROMISE OF PRESENCE

But, the followers of Jesus are given a promise that helps them face their fears honestly. No, we won't always win a victory over our enemies. No, our lives won't always go smoothly. Instead, God in Christ has promised to be with us in our time of trial. We do not suffer our trials alone. We are not abandoned on the sacrificial cross. God is with us.

In our lesson for today we read that even a sparrow does not fall to the ground without the knowledge of God. (Sparrows were inexpensive birds that sold two for a penny to the poorest of the poor.) And yet the creator God takes note of their demise. If God's eye is on the sparrow, then we can be assured that he watches his beloved disciples.

In our time of confusion and fear, when we don't know what to do or where to turn, God knows us and what we need better than we know for ourselves. Jesus expressed it this way; God knows how many hairs we have on our head. That's a number that is constantly changing. And yet God knows. God cares.

Now that doesn't mean that everything will go our way. Birds will still fall to the ground, and our hair will still fall out ... perhaps at a much greater rate than we would like! And we will still face fearful situations as a result of following Jesus.

But, God knows what we are going through and God cares. We are much more important to God than sparrows.

I've heard this message since I was a child, and yet I love to hear it again and again. And I've found that my congregations never tire of hearing this message either.

We are important to God. All of us have worth in God's eyes, and for that reason everyone here today is important to us as well. There is no one here today who is not worthy of our love and attention. Since God cares for the sparrow, all of us are worthy of love and care.

In the final analysis our worth is not dependent upon what others say about us, even what our family or friends say about us. Only God's evaluation matters.

RELIGION, THE MOTHER OF CONFLICT

I have spent a lot of time counseling with people because their important relationships have not been what they should be. Sons and daughters spend their lives trying to make their parents proud. But, no matter what they do; it never seems to be enough. Husbands and wives try to please each other, but it seems like the harder they try the worse things get.

Why do we always hurt the one we love? Why is it that the harder we try to make our important relationships right the worse they get?

And religion is often at the center of these family conflicts. In yesterday's newspaper there was a write in column cleverly entitled, "Religion: It can be the mother of all divisive mom/kid issues."

In her letter a daughter wrote that her mother just wouldn't leave her alone when it came to issues of faith. She was an agnostic and didn't want to force religion on her children. The mother was a believer who couldn't bear the thought of her daughter and grandchildren going through life without faith. The daughter asked the columnist why they just couldn't agree to disagree on this issue.

I have sympathy for both the mom and the daughter in this case. I can understand why the mom would want her child and her grandchildren to have faith. I know that many of you have the same worry about your own children and grandchildren.

But, the Bible does not teach us that faith comes by guilt and manipulation. A desire to control the ones we love can be the very thing that prevents them from coming to faith. Family systems theory teaches us that sometimes our identity can be so wrapped up in pleasing (or displeasing!) the family that we have no real self-identity or faith!

Sometimes salvation begins when there is open and honest conflict. Jesus doesn't want people following him because they are just going along with the crowd or their parents. Jesus wants disciples who have made their own commitment to following him and who are aware of the costs of following him.

Jesus redefined the family. In Matthew 12:49-50 we read that he pointed at his disciples and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Doing the will of God as revealed in Jesus is the most important thing for the Christian. And sometimes this will mean not doing the will of parents or not doing the will of children. According to Jesus, faith can indeed be the mother of division.

But, here's the important difference. The division is not rooted in fear and a desire to control someone else's life. The division is rooted in an overriding faith in the goodness of God and his salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ. Even family does not take position number one for the disciple of Jesus. And only when the family takes a secondary role is it possible for an honest to God faith to develop.

If I were writing that mother who was frustrated at her inability to convey the faith to her daughter, I would suggest that she leave the faith language alone for a while and start living the faith in the presence of her daughter.

Love you daughter as God loves you, with no strings attached. Pray for her and her family.

Take up the cross of rejection by your family on matters of faith and bear it gladly. Love you family enough to love God more and trust God to make changes in your relationship.

This is one of those passages that have been abused by various religious cults. These cults have suggested that in the name of pure religion when you become a member you should cut off all contact with your family and embrace your new family, the members of that particular cult.

That's exactly what we don't believe.

Matthew's Jesus is all about family values. Matthew's Jesus gives us practical advice about the importance of forgiveness and marriage and keeping peace in the community (See Matthew 5 and Matthew 19).

But, today we learn when we follow Jesus sometimes that means loving your family enough to disagree with them.

We don't throw away our important relationships, but we do have enough faith to allow conflict and tension into our lives. We are not afraid to struggle with the big issues of life because we believe in the promise of the Savior. We can gladly take up the cross because we know that beyond the cross is salvation.

CONFLICT CREATION

A church found itself embroiled in conflict so it hired an expert who was experienced in dealing with church conflict. This expert in conflict resolution analyzed the situation and found that many

of the older members were very unhappy with the direction the church was taking. So, they were threatening to take their money and leave.

Some of the newer, younger members were saying to them, "Go ahead and leave. We're taking this church in a whole new direction."

The church consultant was hired to preserve the peace and unity of the church. But, he came up with a rather surprising solution. He said, "I've never seen a church grow without conflict. Has anybody here ever learned anything or grown significantly without conflict? Sometimes Jesus seems to kill one congregation in order to give birth to a new one."

Wow, did I say this guy was an expert in conflict management? It sounds like to me that he's an expert in conflict creation!

And yet there is a certain truth to what he said. Sometimes we have to be shocked by what Jesus requires of us. Sometimes the old way of life needs to die in order for the new way to live. Sometimes we have to give up our family in order to receive them back in a new way.

Before we stand to affirm our faith this morning, we need to consider what we are really saying.

Do we have the courage to follow Jesus? Do we have the courage to love him more than anything or anyone else? Are we willing to have our lives interrupted and disrupted by the call of God? Are we willing to lose our life so that we can really find it?

God give us the strength and the courage to truly say yes.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)