

Matthew 10:34-39 “Not Worthy of Jesus?”

We're just moving right along in our “shocking requirements for following Jesus” series aren't we? Last week we looked at the first part of Matthew 10 where Jesus commissions his disciples to go out and spread the good news. All good and fine until Jesus told them to stay away from non-Jewish folks and people from the Region of Samaria. Why? Because *they weren't worthy*. What? Why would Jesus, who is known for his love and compassion for *all people*, say “stay away from non-Jews?” But when we looked at the *bigger* picture, we realized that the gospel writer was writing for a Jewish audience and that it was important for his readers to know that Jesus had their backs and that they were his first priority. So Matthew told his story of Jesus in a way that his readers could see how Jesus' sympathy and care for non-Jewish people evolved. So what it all boiled down to was, “If Jesus' attitude towards non-Jewish people can change, then I guess *my* attitude needs to change too.” Smart move on Matthew's part to emphasize this. It shows that he knew his audience. And hopefully knowing the context ... knowing the *why* behind Matthew's portrayal of Jesus ... helps us understand how to follow Jesus today. And it kinda helps us sleep better at night knowing that Jesus *still* has compassion for *all people*. So ... that settles that, end of conversation, let's move on. Except ... what we move into is a whole new problem. In the very same commissioning, Jesus tells his disciples, “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 so here we are back at square one again. What are we going to do with this one? Here's something to be thankful for ... at least this text didn't come up in the lectionary last week on Father's Day! Could you imagine how that would have sounded? “Hey, welcome 1st Christian Church, happy Father's Day and we hope you don't mind that your kids are supposed to hate you because of Jesus!”

These seem like such harsh words. They're not easy to hear. Funny how we like to jump all over the Muslim faith and say, “Oh, Islam is a religion of hate and anger! The Koran is filled with violence and

hatred!” But my word, this passage from Matthew sure doesn’t make the *Christian* faith look very appealing does it? Okay, what’s the first thing to consider when we run into a difficult text? Context. When we considered the context for *last* week’s text, things made a lot more sense when we looked at it from a Jewish perspective. Some might say I sort of “rescued” the text so it didn’t sound quite so harsh ... that I might have “sanitized” it a bit. I disagree, but I can see where you’re coming from. This week’s text? Yeah, it probably sounded just as bad to the readers back then as it does to us. Probably worse.

This is still a part of Jesus’ first commissioning of the disciples. He’s sending them out for the first time saying, go out and teach, preach, and heal the Lost Sheep of Israel. Be my voice in the world. But here’s a warning. Things aren’t going to go very well. My message is not going to be received well. You are not going to be accepted. My message is going to draw dividing lines. The Rule of God versus the Rule of Caesar. The haves versus the have nots. Those in power versus those who are not. The super-orthodox religious people versus those who are less concerned with tradition. Those who are considered clean versus those who are considered unclean. Yes, I’m saying that what we’re going to be preaching and teaching *is* good news. It’s ultimately a message about peace and abundance and hospitality that will unite people. But for a lot of folks, it’s not going to sound like good news at all. In fact, it will sound quite threatening. It will stir things up and break the peace. There will be struggle. There will be resistance. There will be violence.

And as upsetting as that sounds to us, it’s something that doesn’t surprise us much. We’ve heard Jesus speak similar words. To make an omelet, you’ve got to break some eggs. But what gets under *our* skin is what he says about *families*. **“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.” We Christians are known for uplifting family values, but this family dynamic sounds downright *dysfunctional!* But we’re not strangers to dysfunctional families are we?

Here’s a question for you ... especially as we’re getting into the summer months where a lot of families come together for reunions. How many of you come from families where everyone shares the exact same religious convictions? Okay, how many of you have families who are on the exact same page when it comes to politics? Anyone have that one family member who is just a little more ... *outspoken* about their convictions than the others? Is this person often referred to as “Crazy Old Uncle So-and-So?” And could it be that there’s someone here in this very space this morning who is the “Crazy Old Aunt or Crazy Old Uncle So-and-So?” And *knows* it! And is maybe even a little *proud* of it! That’s okay. You don’t need to raise your hand. How many of you actually dread going to family reunions for this very reason? I imagine it’s even harder these days when it doesn’t seem like there’s a lot of desire or even room to meet somewhere in the middle where we can simply agree to disagree.

In Mary’s chaplaincy work, she’s always telling me that relationships, especially among families, are fragile. They are continually having to be negotiated and renegotiated. Family dynamics are constantly evolving as circumstances change, especially in our culture. Families today aren’t as close because many are scattered all over the place because of job and career-related necessity. With half of marriages ending in divorce, you’ve always got people coming in and out of families which complicates matters. Families back in Jesus’ time were much different. They had to stay together. What your family did for a living was passed down from generation to generation. Family was your security and protection. It was your retirement plan. From birth to death families were sort of a micro-culture that reflected society in general. You had a ruler, the patriarch, who set the course and called the shots. You had members of the family who carried out the wishes of the patriarch and

kept things running. Daughters were married off to other families, and sons brought wives in from other families which forged alliances and grew networks. It was much different than what we consider a typical family today, unless you're part of a mafia family, then it doesn't seem so strange.

So when you look at it this way, what Jesus said about the effects his message would have on families sounded even *more* shocking to the folks back in his time than it does to us. For us it doesn't sound much worse than a family picnic that went south because Uncle Ernie said something offensive to Cousin Jenny. The picture Jesus paints here is *much* worse. If families in Jesus' time were shaken up as much as he said they would be, the devastating effects wouldn't just be contained in one particular family unit. It would spill over into all aspects of life. It would be a *huge* disruption. And so *this* is what is required to follow Jesus? For families to be torn apart? For whatever fragile peace that might exist to collapse so badly that swords get involved? What does that say? It says that Jesus' message, as good as it may be in the long run, is going to stir things up. And there will be division.

With a few out-on-the-fringe examples, I don't think there are many people who would say, "Institutionalized slavery was a good thing and I think we ought to bring it back." No. We as a civilized nation today agree that slavery is evil. And yet, when the prophetic voices, mostly in churches, first spoke out against slavery and called for its abolition, did everyone just fall in line and say, "Oh, you're right. This isn't a good thing?" No. There was turmoil. The United States became divided. The peace that kept the nation together collapsed and the sword emerged. In many cases, especially along the Mason-Dixon Line, families were torn apart and found themselves on opposite sides of the battle line. And over *what*? Over something that 152 years later we as a nation agree was a terrible evil and a blemish on human history? It would have been nice if they saw the light sooner back then. A more recent example is Civil Rights. The Civil Rights movement was born in the churches of the South. Again, it was the prophetic voices who

challenged the evils of racism and fought for equal rights for people of color. Why? Because they believed that in the Kin-dom of God, *all* people were created equal and *all* people deserved the same rights. And how did folks respond to that? Did everyone have this marvelous epiphany and say, “Wow ... this inequality doesn’t line up with Jesus’ values. We need to repent of our sin of racism and get our acts together!?” No. There was division. There was violence. Families were torn apart. And I’d like to say that as a nation we’re all on the same page as far as our understanding about the evils of racism, but ... well ... we’ve still got work to do. But I’m confident that sometime in the future, our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren will look back on the Civil Rights movement in the same way we look back upon the abolition of slavery. It was the right thing to do and how the heck did anyone think otherwise? And because these future generations didn’t live through it, they’ll wonder why people didn’t see the light when it was happening. The ones who live through the turmoil understand. No good thing and no gospel truth goes unchallenged. Especially if someone has to surrender power for the good to be done.

I don’t think what Jesus said in this passage was prescriptive as much as it was predictive. In other words, Jesus didn’t say, “If you want to follow me, you’ve got to go back to your homes and start some drama.” The disciples had already agreed to follow him. Jesus was saying that *because* you’ve agreed to follow me and *because* my message challenges those who are comfortable with their power ... those who will fight tooth and nail to keep that power and maintain the status quo ... there’s going to be drama and turmoil in your families. And it’s going to work its way all the way up to the highest powers of the earthly kingdoms. I believe Jesus used this very shocking illustration to say, “If you think that following my path is going to be easy, think again.” After all, that path led Jesus to the cross. And Jesus calls us to be ready to take up his cross.