

June 25th, 2023

Matthew 10:24-39 “Two Sparrows for a Penny”

Good grief Pastor Jesse. Last week it was “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons.” Sure, you pulled it together and managed to give us something to take home. But here you are again, only hours before you take off for twelve weeks and you lay *this* big hot mess on our plates. As my daughter-in-law often says, “Why are you like this?” While we’re at it, are you mad at Connie? You made her read a passage of scripture that every cult leader, every militia group, every anarchist, and every hate group on the list uses to justify what they do. Are you mad at *us*? Shouldn’t you be a little more grateful that we allow you to take a sabbatical every seven years? For heavens sake man. Get out of here. We will help you load your kayak on the truck right now. Now is a good time for me to remind you that the most common phrases in both the Old Testament and New Testament is, “Do not let your hearts be troubled” and “do not be afraid.” That phrase even show up in our scripture this morning. So don’t worry. We’ve got this.

This scripture is a continuation of last week’s lesson where Jesus sends his disciples out among the lost sheep of the house of Israel to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons. Last week was all about the “how.” This week is all about what you can expect when you do this. As the church, we are so eager to bring people into the fold that sometimes we forget to tell folks that following Jesus isn’t easy. Two weeks ago, we talked about how we promote ourselves. Now, imagine what kind of response we’d get if we took out an ad in the paper that says something like, “Come to First Christian Church in Chico where you will learn about what it’s like to be treated like a heretic, encouraged to stockpile weapons, stir up conflict, disown your family, and give up your very life for the cause?” I’d like to say, “I don’t think there would be many people out there who would take us up on that offer,” but ... we live in interesting times, and we may wind up attracting some interesting people. But hey, at least I had the decency to use the least controversial phrase in this passage for my sermon title. I

figured that in the bottom corner of this ad we could have a little coupon to cut out that says, “Two sparrows for a penny!” Or maybe “Free churros on fifth Sundays!” This is a *lot* to deal with. So let’s just figure out what we’ve got in front of us first.

This passage is a continuation of last week’s text. There’s a 16-verse gap, but we’ll address some of those in-between verses this week. Speaking of gaps, let’s remember that there is an enormous cultural gap between the readers of Matthew’s gospel and readers who live here and now in the twenty-first century. Don’t get me wrong, it still sounds disturbing to both audiences. These words were meant to convey how potentially dangerous it is to follow Jesus. This text is about fidelity, or as the old hymn says, “Are ye able said the master?” These words are directed at apostles who Jesus sent out to find the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The difference between a disciple and an apostle is that a disciple is a learner ... someone who has made the decision to follow a teacher. An apostle is a disciple who is sent out on a mission. Apostles are expected to put their teacher’s mission above anything or anyone else. There’s a difference between what Jesus typically says to people who *want* to follow him, and what he says to followers who have agreed to be apostles. No matter whether you’re a disciple or an apostle, you can expect resistance. You can expect pushback. The basic message of the gospel is, “God is reconciling the world to God through Christ who is Lord and Savior.” It is an anti-establishment message that challenges many people’s lifestyles, especially those who like the benefits of the status quo. They will push back. “Oh, you’re a disciple of Jesus, huh? You think he’s better than Caesar? You think his teachings are better than 2,000 years of tried-and-true Jewish tradition? You all realize that after Jesus dies, your movement will fade away and you’ll barely be a hiccup in history.” We in the modern church get this to a certain degree. How many times do we run into people or family members who say, “Oh great, here comes Jesse the delusional religious nut who believes in a sky-Daddy God whose son died and rose again. What a weirdo.” That’s what most people who call themselves disciples can expect, unless they live in an echo chamber of seclusion.

But what if you're an apostle? What if you have been called to take the message of the gospel out into the world to the front lines and challenge those who have power? In this passage Jesus is addressing the 12 disciples who agreed to be apostles and take the good news to "the lost sheep of Israel." These lost sheep are the ones who have strayed so far from the Law of Moses and the message of the prophets that they've forgotten what it means to be a holy nation set apart from the rest of the world. These are the religious leaders and influencers who put their highest priority on rules and rituals rather than on basic human needs. These are the people who had become so comfortable with the perks and advantages of living under pagan rulers that they forgot the most basic declaration of the Jewish faith – "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might." These are the ones who forgot the words of the prophet Micah – "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." These are the ones who gained power and wealth by exploiting the poor and sick. These are the ones who had the most to lose by repenting and returning to the roots of their faith. These are the people who weren't just going to push back a little when confronted with their sin. They didn't just roll their eyes and say, "Oh great, here come those nutty Jesus followers." Their response goes far beyond mere rejection. These are the people who go out of their way to *silence* anyone who threatens their way of life, especially apostles. With that, let's take a look at what Jesus told his apostles to expect for their efforts and how that might relate to us.

For some reason, the editors of the lectionary start this week's text with verse 24. That's too bad because the bulk of the warnings about what to expect are in the 16 verses between last week's text and the one we have this morning. In verse 17, Jesus says, "Beware, 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." In other words, you won't just be facing

opposition from the religious leaders, you'll also be facing the "governors and kings" who the religious leaders are in cahoots with. Well, imagine that. Corrupt government and corrupt religion making shady deals with each other to stay in power. How odd, right? And those who challenge the powers-that-be concerning their sin will be called heretics or labeled unpatriotic. That's what Jesus said his apostles can expect, and it has remained true for 2,000+ years. Consider what happened to Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he challenged Adolph Hitler's persecution of the Jews and called out the many churches who supported that persecution. He courageously stood up for the truth and was executed for speaking that truth to power. He was a 20th century apostle.

Ok, let's talk about what Jesus told the apostles to expect concerning family ties. In verse 21, Jesus said, "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death." In verse 34 – 36, Jesus said, "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." He's quoting the prophet Micah here by the way. This isn't original material. Micah was telling the house of Israel that this is what to expect when the Messiah comes. This is Jesus' way of saying, "Listen, the prophets warned us about this 700 years ago. Don't act surprised." This is not Jesus calling on us to stockpile swords or other weapons, nor is this meant to encourage people to cause family drama. Jesus was not anti-family. But he did say that the very nature of the gospel message will likely *cause* this sort of conflict in families. Nobody ever hopes or wishes for family strife or conflict, but sometimes it comes up out of the blue in ways we don't expect. We might start out saying, "We're a tight-knit family and nothing is going to come in between us." And then, politics or religion comes knocking on the door and next thing you know all these things Jesus mentioned happen. Again, this isn't Jesus saying, "Go out there and stir up trouble and ruin Thanksgiving dinner." This is Jesus saying, "When you live the truth of the gospel message, these

things will inevitably come up.” Jesus is all about restoring and purifying relationships. But when apostles are pushed to choose between following Jesus or maintaining family relationships, they are expected to be faithful to Jesus in all circumstances. In Luke’s version of this morning’s scripture, Jesus was responding to those who were using family as an excuse to not follow him. “Oh, I can’t follow you now. I’ve got kids to look out for! Oh, I can’t follow you now, my parents are old ... I’ll jump on board after they die.” Jesus says, “I need apostles to proclaim the good news *now*. Let the dead bury the dead. I don’t have enough time on this earth to deal with people who use family ties as an excuse.” Still a hard message to swallow, but it’s not an *anti-family* message. Jesus is warning about allowing family to become an idol. The very nature of the gospel message is capable of dividing families.

And of course, this leads us to another important matter to consider – What is expected of those who follow Jesus? The answer is simultaneously simple and difficult. They are expected to be devoted to Jesus above all others. Another way to frame this may be, “It is better to be killed for the sake of the Gospel than to live denying it.” Wow, Jesse, there you go again. That’s a heckuva thing to say. Yes. As I said earlier, sometimes we forget to remind people that following Jesus is often difficult. But often times the best things are. In his commentary on Matthew, Thomas Long writes, “To give one’s life away in the name of Christ is to be given all that makes life free, holy and good.”

So what lesson are we supposed to learn from this passage that warns us about what we can expect while following and serving Jesus? And if we’re *not* facing the same struggles Jesus is talking about, are we even doing Christianity right? The Gospel message is one that challenges our comfort. It challenges the status quo. It challenges established power. When preaching the Gospel of Jesus, there will be push back. But at the same time, we don’t need to invent hardships to make it seem like we’re doing the right thing. The modern church often has a large martyrdom complex. Because we’re not being rounded up and arrested for following Jesus, sometimes we perceive persecution around every corner. I often

use the example of how some people think they're being persecuted when a Starbucks or Target employee says, "Happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." Come on. There are much worse things than that.

Maybe the lesson today is simply about being mindful of where our true devotions lie. Are we willing to lay down our lives for the sake of love, including love for our enemies? And no, most of us may never be put in that kind of situation. But are we willing to face even the smallest push-back for the sake of following Christ? Either way, we can be assured that Christ is there with us. As Jesus assures his apostles in verse 31, "Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."