

“Matthew’s Dumpster Fire”

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Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴[Jesus said to the disciples,] “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it 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. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So 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; ³³but 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.

³⁵For 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;

³⁶and 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; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

This day’s lesson from the Gospel of Matthew takes us back to the earlier part of Jesus’ ministry, to a time when his work was focused on bringing back the “lost sheep of Israel,” when he was still focused on sharing the Good News with his fellow co-religionists. Yet there are also hints of what is to come, of the broadening of his audience, and, especially relevant to us, of the cost of discipleship. But that is not what many people focus on when they reflect on this passage. Jesus here is combative. What’s all this about swords and divided families? And what’s this talk about Beelzebul? This sure doesn’t sound like

the Christianity we know, where we are seeking reconciliation, talking about harmony, and placing the Prince of Peace at the center of our worship life. Frankly, this lesson is a dumpster fire.

For the mainline Christian, this passage poses an interpretive challenge. It's a text filled with objectionable material. The fire appears to rage, and we are left to extinguish the inferno.

Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating. Indeed, maybe any problems we encounter aren't with the text itself, but our preferences for what it should say, our discomfort for what we are being asked to do.

We all want to be liked, but Matthew's Gospel tells us that if we follow Jesus, we will have to risk opprobrium. Just as Jesus was called "Master of the House of Beelzebul," we, as his followers, will be called disciples of the devil. Now, recall those who followed Jesus believed that he would become king, that in a new order they would sit at the top table, in line for honors and power. "Not happening," Jesus essentially said. "If you follow my way, you will need to endure taunts, insults, and obloquy."

And it got better. For while Jesus wasn't such a big deal at this point in the story, and he was often doing things quietly, he hinted at the public, universal nature of his work: he might be doing things below the radar at the time of this lesson, but his followers would be called upon to shout the Good News from the rooftops.

Talk about calling attention to oneself and inviting all sorts of trouble!

But, just as they used to say in the old TV ads, wait—there's more!

That's right. Jesus' followers would have opponents, and not just the kind who would mete out physical punishment, but who would attack the spirit, break the body, and crush the soul.

Sure, Jesus offered some reassurance, telling his followers that God knew them, that he would look after them. But then he conditioned his words of comfort. Stand by God, and all will be well; turn away from him, and all bets are off.

And then Jesus offered up the clincher, throwing gasoline on the already raging, proverbial conflagration: all the talk about the sword, and the division, and families breaking apart, and parents set against children, and sibling against sibling.

What on earth is going on here?

How is this passage supposed to excite people, to draw them to the Christian life, to inspire them to follow the Way of Jesus?

This passage is part of what is known as the Missionary Discourse, one of five such discourses in Matthew. In these verses, the author of the Gospel focuses on what is necessary to be a good and faithful disciple.

We modern mainline Christians often have a problem with words like “missionary,” imagining some hyper-committed white person heading off to impose the faith on unwilling locals in some faraway location. A missionary is seen as an agent of imperialism. Now, I do not deny that those who spread the faith, particularly in the nineteenth century, were often doing so with mixed motives. The missionaries who went to the Sandwich Islands were not colonizers, and they believed in the faith. Their descendants were a whole other matter, bringing disgrace to Christianity as they took over the lands then overthrew the kingdom of Hawaii. But many missionaries have done good work, they have served those among whom they lived, and, most important to the Gospel, they did what Jesus commanded them to do in Matthew 28, verses 19 and 20. There he told his followers, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Right from the start, Christians have been called to share the faith. In short, we are meant to be evangelicals.

Of course, “evangelical” is also a loaded term. Images of politically driven people come to mind, of agendas, and platform, and all sorts of ideas we may find objectionable. But in truth, “evangelical” is not an epithet but a marker, a word that indicates what the Christian is to do. We are called, just like those disciples in Matthew 28, to share the word about Jesus far and wide.

Being a disciple isn’t always easy work. That’s what this passage tells us. We will need to be prepared for people to disagree with us, to mock us, to ignore us. We can’t hope that others will share the Gospel. That is something we need to do. The world of Christendom of the 1950s and the post-war glory days of Protestantism in America are history. We are called to live in the present. If we don’t tell the story, it won’t be told, or worse, it will be told by those who twist it and deform it.

So, Jesus told his followers, shout it from the rooftops. If his followers, and that includes you and me, are to be denigrated and opposed, we may as well stand in the spotlight, to have our moment in the sun. If people are going to criticize you regardless of what your convictions are, then don’t be quiet about what you believe.

This isn’t a passage that promises that all will be well, that the sun will always shine, that the road will be easy, or any other lovely thing we might wish for. This text is a challenge to make a commitment. The believer is called to be firm, to stand his or her ground, to be ready to make sacrifices, to take risks in the name of what is right. It is an invitation to court disaster, not for the sake of thrill-seeking but in the name of the Lord.

We are reminded that there are some things worse than physical harm—and this is the loss of one’s soul. We may not see the threat starkly delineated in our everyday lives, but do we not face temptation on a regular basis, be it blandishments or indulgences or

invitations to fall away? God may be infinitely loving and forgiving, but he will not stop us from leaving him—and then we must face the consequences. We expect that God will stand by us, but how often do we consider whether we will stand by him?

Sometimes we can show our commitment through worship, sometimes through service, and still other times through the witness we offer. Do we want to be known as Democrats? Republicans? Independents? How about instead we seek to be seen as faithful Christians whose faith shapes every aspect of our lives?

Are we willing to risk relationships because of our faith? Or will we soft-pedal our relationship with God because it might complicate our dealings with a relative or friend?

I know that it is hard to hear, but the Gospel is clear: the relationship we have with God must come first. And through that, our other relationships will grow stronger and deeper, able to withstand differences of opinion, and should they buckle, we will know they were not that strong to begin with.

In recent weeks our long, national conversation about race has been reanimated. There have been protests and disagreements, some violence, but an incredible outpouring of a desire for justice and fairness and a reckoning with the unfortunate parts of our history. We in the church need to take a stand, one that may perhaps be uncomfortable at first, but one that is ultimately necessary. Some of us have recently joined the local Black Lives Matter vigils, while others have been going for a much longer time. I know that we may not all agree 100% with the BLM platform. But there is a foundational claim being made when one says that “Black Lives Matter,” and it’s not that white lives or police lives or any other lives matter less. It’s that someone who is black should not have to worry about a random encounter with a cop, or their child playing with a water gun, or being able to go birding in peace. It’s the idea that all of us, no matter our race, were created by God equally in his image, and that we all have the right to live—and by that I mean live life to the fullest, not merely struggle to exist. I hope we can all sign on to a proposition like that. I believe that Jesus demands such fidelity from us.

Remember, Jesus knew what it was like to be on the outs with people because he held unpopular views. He alienated his co-religionists. He ticked off his siblings. He opposed the civil and religious authorities when the penalties for doing so were unbelievably harsh.

We are called ultimately to bear the cross, just as Christ did. None of us will be executed in such an awful and public fashion as Jesus was, but that’s not the point. If God gave his all for us, what are we willing to do for God?

Jesus is always looking for true disciples, committed believers who will share the word about God’s love, grace, and saving power. God is looking for you and me, for all of us, to be part of the beloved community that was founded by Jesus and is nurtured by the Holy Spirit.

I've said before that we follow a pretty special kind of Christianity, one that is rooted in orthodox belief but is open to the nuances of the modern age. We can think, and probe, and ask questions. We can differ in our perspectives on what Jesus was saying. But we will do so together, and hopefully then act on what we discern to be our calling to love and serve the Lord.

Earlier I called this passage a dumpster fire. For a preacher or interpreter of Scripture it poses challenges. But I'd like to suggest that the flame that burns here is the Holy Spirit, that what we see here is the fire of Pentecost. The words of the Gospel still have the power to illuminate a world that is in desperate need of what the man from Nazareth, the Son of God, came to tell humanity 2,000 years ago.

Being a faithful Christian means taking risks. Remember how the lesson for today ended? It was with these words in verse 39: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [Jesus'] sake will find it."

We are creatures who are generally inclined to seek security and comfort. That is all well and fine. But these things come with a price. Jesus tells us not to become captives of what makes us feel safe; otherwise, we may become prisoners to our possessions, our beliefs, even our delusions. When we are prisoners, we lose our freedom to truly listen to God, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to let the Holy Spirit surround and comfort and engage us.

Matthew wrote at a time of great change in the world, when certainties were falling, when people wondered what would happen to them and their loved ones. We live in similar times. And if we heed the Gospel author's words, we will commit ourselves fully to what matters and take risks to share the Good News, even at the risk of ticking off others. If we do so, God will be with us, and the light of the Church will burn bright and show us the way forward, from the depths of night to the new day that the Lord has made.