

“Loyalty and Truth-telling” – Matthew 10:24-39 – June 21, 2020

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As we continue reading Matthew’s gospel, this text continues the scene from last week where Jesus is sending his disciples out to share his message with others. He is preparing them for what they may face when they speak the gospel in those towns and villages to those who have yet to hear it. Not everyone will want to hear it, in fact some will denounce the message, treating with derision the messenger as they would treat Jesus himself. Perhaps even within their own families, the message of the reign of God will not be a welcome truth.

We remember, that a disciple is one who learns from following a teacher. The message that Jesus brought into the first-century world was not good news for all people. It was good news for those who were poor, those who were oppressed, those who had no status, those who championed the rights of others, those who struggled to live day to day. Jesus talked about the reign of God as something that would overthrow the power structures that existed in that time. It wasn’t to be as a result of the clash of armies on a battlefield, but as the result of a new understanding that placed love of God and love of others over-against human systems of power, greed and exploitation.

And we remember, it was this same message that turned the religious and political leaders against Jesus, because he advocated on behalf of the common person. He exalted the weak, befriended the sinner, and argued with those who claimed to be righteous. Jesus ushered in an age where the power of love would triumph over those who used physical power for their own gain. And to those who held the power and leadership over the people, that was not a message they wanted advocated by the common people. That kind of message stirred up trouble, especially from those whose position and authority rested upon keeping people in their assigned places.

Jesus knew that his position would not be popular with those who held the most power, because they benefitted from keeping people down. And so Jesus warned his disciples that preaching his message, sharing the truth about God’s reign, would be divisive and they would face rejection. And in some cases, their very lives would be at risk.

We know of course that indeed Jesus’ message did ultimately cost him his life. The religious leaders didn’t like how he was subverting their authority, and the local Romans fell in line when they believed that Jesus’ followers could very easily stir up trouble. Squashing the leader should silence the disciples, at least that is what they all believed. Jesus knew that his message would not be popular with the worldly authorities, and he warned his followers that to be his disciple meant having to take on personal risk. Many turned away from him. But many also followed.

Along with his warning, Jesus also assured his followers that by speaking his truth, they were ultimately doing what was right from God's perspective. In the long run, worldly suffering could not compare with eternal righteousness, and with this he encouraged them to face their fears, standing against those who might do them harm.

Though centuries have passed since Jesus physically walked our earth, the worldly powers and authorities that existed in the first century are not that dissimilar to the power systems of today. Strangely enough, humans still crave the wealth, security and power over others that they have always enjoyed. So of course, the message of Christ is still very relevant. And with as many resources that are available in our world today, there are still so many people who lack even the most basic of their needs being met.

We who would be followers of Christ are still defined as his disciples, his learners. We long to hear and be taught by his truth, and we may even push back when his truth challenges our very own practices. To be a disciple means to be constantly learning from our teacher. Something that I have heard many wise people say is that we never stop being learners. It is when we come to believe that we already know everything that we need to know, that we find ourselves getting into trouble. Until everyone has their fair share, until love has conquered pain and suffering, until people truly respect and walk alongside each other, there is still work to be done and lessons to be learned.

Our world is in a state of flux. The pandemic has dragged on for months, and so many people have succumbed to fatigue, relaxing the vigilance they held onto just a few months ago. It's almost as if we think that if we ignore it, it will just go away. Living in times of uncertainty is not easy. But the need to show compassion and kindness to one another does not go on hiatus, simply because we're tired.

Learning from Jesus, learning about ourselves, and growing in our faith does not stop when it becomes uncomfortable. It is in those times of flux, uncertainly, weariness that we must stay the course, recognizing that which threatens to derail us, and refocus on Jesus, who warned his followers and encouraged them so long ago, do not fear, but instead, speak the truth out in the light and from the housetops. Hold fast to the message of the gospel, believing that God's righteousness will always win out over worldly systems and powers. The way of following Christ will never be easy, but again, it will be good, and it will be right.