

THE SECRET AT THE HEART OF CREATION; MATTHEW 10:24-39; JUNE 25, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Today's text too often gets swept under the rug of history by which I mean these difficult sayings of Jesus are read and remain in the context in which they were first spoken; that is, Matthew's church – primarily Jews – who were beginning to respond to and adopt Jesus teachings even at the risk of being ostracized in their homes and synagogues. Ah, well, we say, those circumstances don't apply to us, therefore, this call to absolute allegiance and sacrificial service doesn't apply either.

But this gritty portion of Matthew does have something important to say and is important for us to consider. On the one hand, if it seems too extreme and fanatical we might use it as an opportunity to reexamine our own faith and ask whether we have remade Christianity to our own liking and whether it is possible to so change the faith and have it remain Christian.

On the other hand, what Matthew talks about is not alien at all: confession of who Jesus is, living toward the end of history with concern for mission in this world, letting go of both material possessions and fear of what others might think about or do to us, placing loyalty to Christ above all other loyalties, even the deepest ones to home and family, living a life of non-resistance to violence, and finally trust in God and God's future.

My point is we would be ill advised to ignore these words of Jesus merely because they are hard sayings regarding to what and to whom we make our ultimate pledge of allegiance – indeed they are perhaps words the church in North America needs to hear now more than ever.

Privilege, which most of us enjoy, has a way of deadening us, to the harsh realities of the world. Israel, as it grew increasingly prosperous, wrote the book on falling asleep to the priorities of God and Torah. The prophets made clear what happens when that occurs.

Many if not most Christians live in economic or political conditions that impose harsh limits. I'm thinking of Christians in the Middle East who live, without rights, under monarchies or dictatorships and are persecuted; Christians in Africa where emerging economies, unstable governments, tribal conflicts and civil war make them targets of death squads because of their beliefs. Evangelicals in this nation put the rest of us to shame going to places of great need here or elsewhere in the world; our friends at Jericho Road Ministries are an excellent example; our own young people today preparing for their mission in Maine.

Essentially, today's text talks about fidelity and fear and how dangerous it can be to follow Jesus in an environment hostile to the faith.

Outside of saying grace in a restaurant or inviting a friend to church, maybe the faith we proclaim is too safe.

Where are we resisting popular culture and risking ridicule or worse because it violates Jesus' teachings and values?

A few weeks ago I had a fascinating conversation with a new Christian – a young professional woman who moved to Buffalo from the west coast. She is highly educated, deeply thoughtful and works in the tech industry.

She told me how she got involved in rock climbing with a group of young adults out west and one young man in particular was quite open talking about his faith. Initially, she thought it a little odd but as she got to know him, she realized he was a person of deep integrity, committed to Christian values and principles and to service to those less fortunate.

The young man talked not so much about himself but about Jesus. His way of talking about Jesus was not intellectual or academic; nor was it zealous and simplistic – it was more like Jesus as a personified code of ethics and conduct to which he held himself accountable. Over time, as she got to know him, she began to see the values he professed were acted out instinctively almost everywhere in his life.

That's when, she said, her faith began to awaken. She realized Jesus was not merely an historic figure but a living presence in her friend's life.

She said it was like waking up from a deep sleep as she gave more of herself away to the teachings of a first century rabbi; she felt a deep hunger being satisfied; an unexpected joy seeping into her daily routine.

She recognized things about herself and the world she wanted to change; the more she thought about Jesus the more like him she wanted to become. There was more to her, more to the world, more to other people than she imagined.

The bible, of course, is an epic tale about the battle between the forces of good versus the forces of evil. When Jesus appeared on the scene he was and remained a good Jew. The trouble he caused was by challenging people, including the religious authorities, to live by the spirit of the law they professed such great allegiance to.

But the more following the law became an end in itself the more they lost sight of the One who gave the law and the purpose for which he gave it – namely to honor the sacred gift and Giver of life or as the Westminster Confession so eloquently says – “to love God and enjoy him forever.”

Jesus upset the settled arrangements of the practice and role of religion in society. By exposing the rigidity and emptiness of the faith he breathed life into a moribund tradition and sent shivers down the spines of the leaders of church and state. His first followers like the young woman I met recently began seeing themselves and the world differently. They found new life and vigor in the coming of an ordinary day. They practiced a simple faith – loving God and their neighbor – and they realized they had more neighbors than they thought; people who were suffering disease, poverty, loneliness, unjust imprisonment – and so they feed and clothed and healed and sheltered and cared for their neighbors in a society living under the weight of Roman occupation and abject need; and we know what happened – hope sprang up everywhere; people came to life; religion was reborn.

It doesn't take much imagination to see the parallels to today – a society living under the weight of an increasingly privileged class while the underprivileged class grows in number so that in Buffalo one third of the children live in poverty.

The problem is that statistic has ceased to amaze us. We shake our heads and explain it away with various sociological or political rationalizations; most of which make perfect sense; but nothing changes; things only get worse.

Not to mention that we have just witnessed a new health care bill that was designed in secret and will be proposed for a vote in the Senate this week. What we have learned so far about the bill is that it is as bad or worse and as unpopular among health care professionals and the general population as the one the House of Representatives proposed a few months ago.

Tony Hoagland, one of our great poets, has this to say about evil in a poem he wrote on reading one of the great Faulkner novels defending the South on the one hand, but indicting its tolerance and justification of slavery on the other hand.

Hoagland writes, "There is evil in the world/like a virus, or a lingering disease/it sleeps inside the rivers and the trees—/The reason for suffering isn't some bad choice you made, or something you did wrong,/ it isn't anybody's fault; it just exists,/it is a condition of this place;/and the only purpose it serves/is that it wakes us up,/at certain moments in our lives,/it rouses us/to get up on our feet and find the door."

Given the toxic politics of the day; given the broken systems of education; given the peril and danger we have placed the earth in as hundreds of species and eco-systems face extinction; maybe it's time for us to wake up, get to our feet and find the door.

Perhaps Jesus' words today have more relevance that we knew. "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but can't kill the soul. Instead, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Aren't two sparrows sold for a small coin? But not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. Even the hairs of your head are all counted. Don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.

"Therefore to everyone who acknowledges me before people I will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven. Don't think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I haven't come to bring peace but a sword.

Those who don't pick up their crosses and follow me aren't worthy of me. Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them."

I realize I am walking a thin line here. There is fatigue with the barrage of daily information and disappointing news from Washington and elsewhere.

It's not that there are two sides to the story; it's that there is a moral and an immoral side and the question is which side are we on.

Take politics out of it. It has to do with evil. It has to do with waking up. It has to do with getting to our feet and finding the door.

There's a wonderful Garrison Keillor episode in Lake Wobegon. Wayward Catholics return to their hometown church on Christmas Eve to find themselves, to discover their loss: "Father Emil roused himself from bed, where he'd been down with cancer since Columbus Day. He was inspired by the sight of all the lapsed Catholics parading into church with their unbaptized children.

He gave a hard homily, strolled into the congregation. 'Shame, shame on us for leaving what we were given that was true and good," he said. "To receive a great treasure in our younger days and abandon it so that we can lie down in the mud with swine.' He stood, one hand on the back of a pew—children of this church who grew up and moved away and did well and now tell humorous stories at parties about Father Emil and what it was like to grow up Catholic – all of them shuddered a little, afraid he might grab them by their Harris-tweed collars, stand them up and ask them questions.

They came for Christmas, to hear music, see candles, smell incense and feel hopeful, and here was their old priest, hair in his ears whacking them around—was it brain cancer he had? He looked at all them he'd given first communion to, now grown heavy and prosperous and sad and indolent, but clever enough to explain their indolence and sadness as a rebellion against orthodoxy, an intellectual protest which really was only dullness of spirit. He stopped. It was so quiet you could hear them not breathing. Then he said this was why Our Lord had come, to rescue us from dullness of spirit, so the shepherds had found and so shall we, then it was Christmas again."

We had the good fortune to celebrate our granddaughter's second birthday last week in Ridgefield, CT. Apart from the big day and all the festivities we had the opportunity, now that Eliza is walking, to take her for a few strolls in the neighborhood.

What I wasn't prepared for was seeing the world through her eyes. We would be walking along and suddenly she would stop, bend down and pick up a stone or a leaf or a dandelion – then place them in her stroller. And we had to stop at when we passed the grade school – so she could hug every one of the six trees in front of the gymnasium.

My conclusion was that I had grown dull of spirit; that I was blind to the splendor and wonder of creation. That something so simple as a pebble could enchant her and not hold the slightest interest for me.

What kind of world is it we are creating and will leave for our children, for Simon and his generation?

To see the world again with the eyes of a child; with the eyes of new faith; to see ourselves and one another with a new and fresh perspective; to grasp the beauty of the gift of creation and the unacceptability and sin of defacing creation through our abuse of the environment or our exploitation of people.

There ought to be enough evil in the world by now to catch our attention and make us want to change ourselves and the status quo; it's what Jesus came to challenge and inspire us to do. Amen.