

A Matter of Life and Death
Sermon on Matthew 10:24-39 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, June 19, 2005

The latest public opinion polls are not good news at the White House. According to several recent surveys conducted by various polling organizations, when asked, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?” about half of those responding indicated they disapproved of the president’s performance. I suppose it comes as little surprise that those responding to the FOX News poll gave the president the lowest job disapproval rating, at 43%, while 51% of those watching CBS News disapproved of the president’s job performance.¹ The president wouldn’t like my talking about his standing in the polls because he doesn’t believe in them. While running for reelection he said, “If you’re sick and tired of the politics of cynicism and polls and principles, come and join this campaign.”

No one likes to learn that they are unpopular, and waking up to find out just how numerically unpopular you are splashed all over America’s newspapers cannot be a pleasant experience. I don’t imagine that being lambasted routinely on the late night comedy shows is all that funny, either. Everyone, from the president on down to the person on the street, especially if they have spent any time in a junior high school, has felt the sting of name-calling, the loneliness of being unpopular, the pain of rejection. Perhaps you learned to shake off the taunts of your erstwhile enemies by repeating, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” But words do hurt; ask anyone who has ever been called “fat” or “stupid” or “ugly.”

Regrettably, and shamefully, name-calling has become part of the political landscape. It has also been a part of the religious landscape since the very first day Jesus began to preach. Name-calling, insults, and rejection were things Jesus had become accustomed to, but they were new to his disciples. And any new situation, whether it’s starting the sixth grade or your first day

¹ Results from polls found at <http://www.pollingreport.com/BushJob.htm>.

on the job, requires some orientation. You want someone experienced, someone who has “been there and done that” to take you around and introduce you to your new classmates or coworkers, to show you the ropes, and to give you an inside track on what’s really going on.

That is where we find the disciples: in orientation. Discipleship 101. And the first thing Jesus tells his disciples is the rather unpleasant truth that “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master” (Mt. 10:24-25). Like a tender-hearted drill sergeant instructing recruits at biblical boot camp, Jesus puts his disciples in their place: they are followers and servants. They are not on the same level as, much less above, their teacher and master. Their task is to emulate the model. And the model is none other than Jesus himself, who was misunderstood, and mocked, and made fun of. Jesus, the Prince of Heaven, was called Beelzebul, the prince of demons.

Jesus is teaching his followers that what he suffers, they can expect to suffer. Those disciples who have the privilege of sharing in the divine vocation of preaching and healing “must also expect to share his unpopularity.”² Those disciples who have the privilege of sharing in Jesus’ authority and mission must also expect to share in Jesus’ suffering. Those disciples who have the privilege of faithfully living out Jesus’ tasks and commands must also expect to experience insult and opposition. Those who are Jesus’ disciples can expect conflict, opposition, misunderstanding, and even persecution precisely because they are Jesus’ representatives.

In the light of these unpleasant prospects, the question becomes, Who would sign on for such an assignment? Why not let Jesus remain an “army of one”? Robert Smith answers that “[T]he consolation of every disciple and servant is precisely this: rejection and persecution mean

² R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985) 185).

that they are like their teacher, like their master.”³ Because disciples follow their teacher and slaves their master, they are to be like him in all things. If we want to share in the glory and power and riches that are Christ’s, we must also be willing to share in the suffering and opposition and weakness that are Christ’s.

What is remarkable about this life of discipleship to which we are called is just how honest Jesus is willing to be about what it will involve. With Jesus there is no fine print or hidden fees. Jesus is wonderfully, if painfully, honest about the fact that being his followers, believing in him, is going to cost us, and the price demanded is not cheap. Discipleship demands that we take up the cross. Indeed Jesus says, “[W]hoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (10: 38). Being obedient to Jesus may mean embracing that which can ultimately kill us, for he calls us to embrace the unclean, to embrace the diseased, to embrace the enemy. We are called to that embrace—the embrace of the cross—without fear.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt told us that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” But in light of a world that does not understand the message of peaceful nonviolence or forgiveness of debts or feeding one’s enemy, it seems that there is more to fear than fear itself. Is not fear what one naturally feels at the prospect of hostility, opposition, and punishment by other people? And so three times Jesus must assure his disciples, “Fear not”: “Have no fear of [your opponents]” (10:26); “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (10:28); “Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (10:31).

We are not to be afraid because of the great truth that death has been conquered. Because of what God has done in the resurrection of Jesus, death no longer has dominion over us. It is no longer our final fate. Rather, it is the entry way to new life. This is the paradox that underlies

³ Robert H. Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989) 149.

Jesus' teaching about the nature and cost of discipleship: that suffering is glorification, that losing is finding, that death is new life. Call it the logic of God's kingdom or the calculus of divine grace. Call it backward, upside-down, or topsy-turvy. Just call it the marvelous and liberating truth of the gospel.

Those who take on the task of Christian discipleship in their baptism, those who take up their cross, those who each day seek to be obedient to Christ's commands to love God and neighbor, were, as St. Paul said, "baptized into his death." "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). The promise of God is that those "who have been united with [Jesus] in a death like his ... will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:5).

And therein lies the phenomenally good news that turns the world on its head: resurrection is reality. New life is a possibility. Hope is grounded in truth. Death is not the end, but the beginning. Everything we thought we knew about the world—to fear our enemies, to fear those who can kill us—is false and illusory. Those who mock us are not to be feared. That life of self-giving in which we can lose ourselves is where we shall be found. That which can kill us is to be embraced, for it is God who suffered and died on the cross who gives us life.