

Sermon – 3rd Pentecost
Matthew 10:21-33
June 21, 2020

“Is This the Life, or What?”

I'd rather this passage from Matthew read this way. *“I have come to make everyone, in families, communities, whole cities, even entire nations, see eye to eye, to unite them around a wonderfully warm and cozy love that makes no demands, anticipates no commitment, and disturbs no one or nothing of the status quo. I will make neighbors the best of friends, I will smooth over all the rough spots between husband and wives, and in my name, there will be no such thing as sibling rivalry. Nations will contact one another in advance about any plans they have that might affect neighboring nations, and they will get not only their consent about such activity, but also earnestly seek their advice and counsel. AMEN”*

But that's not what our lesson from Matthew says, does it? I would have preferred a promise of blessed interpersonal unity through the unity of heaven and earth that Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins represent. But it's not that way, and if this passage from Matthew can in any way be understood as prescriptive, or at least predictive, it cannot be that way. In the current world, division is the watchword of the day. Pandemic isolation has become familiar to us all – now racial divisions are in stark relief. We get it, if we're paying attention at all, to what division looks and sounds like – it's mayhem at its worst – deep seated mistrust, misunderstanding, hurt and discouragement at the very least.

That Jesus then would predict “in his name” divisions in our most intimate social unit – the family, is quite jarring. What is clear from this lesson is that faith in Christ creates division because it necessitates devotion – a way of life that truly would, if embraced, usher in the sort of idyllic world I just described. But what would that sort of world first require – well, when Matthew wrote at length about the temptation of our Lord immediately after his baptism in the River Jordan, he was preparing us for what such a world would require. Recall that in his temptation, Jesus was offered another way of life – a choice between devotion to God or devotion to the very human desires his incarnation had thrust upon him.

Satan tempted Jesus with illusions all humans face – pleasure, security, and prestige. Jesus responded to each with scriptures such as “*man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God,*” and “*worship the Lord your God and serve him only.*” In our lesson today, our Lord is in so many words expressing to his disciples what such devotion to God would entail. In calling followers to himself, Jesus engages no deception, he practices no bait and switch. But it’s important for us to remember that in this passage – though it seems overwhelmingly bleak, is quite full of hope and promise. “*Do not be afraid...are not the very hairs of your head numbered* (by your creator)?”

By invoking such a small part of our being (the hairs of our head) as important – paired with the words “*are you not much more valuable than they*” and “*don’t be afraid*”, our Lord is in fact saying that if the small things of life will win your creator’s attention and concern, how much more so big things. That is why the words about division, be they in families or society, are not, as we often presume, dire warnings of doom for confessing Christians, but rather the source of hope for us.

Yes, struggle will come, real struggle in which common solutions are elusive especially when it is by shouting that we try to find them. But grace will arise to meet them and then exceed them. The key to understanding this passage is in verse 32 – where Jesus talks of acknowledgement of him. To our ears it sounds like simple awareness – as in “*I acknowledge your letter of....or I’m aware of your presence in the room.*” But the word has much deeper associations than cognitive awareness – it means both cognitive and volitional solidarity with.

In other words – Jesus says whoever is with me...is “WITH me.” If you yearn for God, you’ll have God. If you yearn for Christ, you’ll have Christ. Coupled as it were with the express concern God has for even little things like the strands of hair that we leave in our brushes and combs and sweep up off of our bathroom floors, is it not great hope that God will “acknowledge” (be in solidarity with) our suffering, both personal and societal, and remedy it not with aloof, religious pronouncements and formulas, but with HIS own longsuffering presence and everlasting promise that this too, you shall overcome?

Yes, that is what it means – that is why it’s our gospel – as strange as it may sound – why it is good news. I don’t know about you, but it’s just what I need, more than ever. AMEN

