

Shout from the Housetops
A Sermon on Matthew 10:24-39
Proper 7
June 21, 2020

Introduction

Sometimes the gospel sounds strange. Today is one of those times. Today's text has a jarring image of God as the one who is able to destroy body and soul and cast a person into an eternity in Gehenna.

The comfort that the text offers does not comfort us much today. You will suffer much, but you will be rewarded with an eternity in heaven. What about life in this world?

The text has a jarring image of Jesus. I came with a sword to divide a man from his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Happy Father's Day.

Is that the good news we are supposed to proclaim? What is the good news?

First Move: Be Bold and Courageous

Today's text is the middle to last part of the missionary discourse in Matthew. This discourse takes up all of Chapter 10. We will finish next week with the last three verses.

The mission that Jesus gave the disciples last week was to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and to heal suffering wherever they found it. Jesus models this behavior for them in Matthew 5 through 7, when he teaches the Sermon on the Mount, and Chapters 8 and 9, in which he performs ten healing miracles.

Jesus knows that if the disciples continue the mission that he began, they will encounter persecution just as he did. Nevertheless, he asks them to imitate him. The Pharisees said that Jesus could cast out demons because he was the ruler of the demons. The disciples will be accused of similar things.

The setting for the missionary discourse is thoroughly eschatological. Matthew folded part of Mark 13, which is called Mark's Little Apocalypse, into last week's text. Matthew understands the suffering that the disciples will endure as the birth pangs of the new creation that God is bringing about. Christian suffering is part of the eschatological woes and will end only when the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven. Matthew even uses the Greek verb ἀποκαλύπτω, which means to reveal or

uncover. “For nothing that has been hidden will not be revealed, and [nothing] hidden that will not be known.” In apocalyptic texts, it is God’s master plan for creation that is being revealed.

Matthew understands the suffering that his community was enduring as the tribulation that comes with the end times. It probably reflects persecution that Matthew’s community was suffering at the time that Matthew was writing his gospel. Matthew refers to the synagogues as *their* synagogues at the beginning of the discourse. Matthew says they will scourge you in the synagogues. Matthew’s community may be facing a similar situation to what John’s community was facing in the story of the blind beggar in John Chapter 9, which I preached on in March. Both Matthew and John encourage their communities to come out of hiding and openly proclaim their faith in Jesus.

Today’s text is surrounded by difficult commands and ominous prophecies. In the midst of this trauma, Matthew attempts to comfort his community.

Do not fear the ones who can destroy the body but are not able to destroy the soul. Fear God instead; God is able to destroy both soul and body. The things of eternity are what count.

God is the sovereign Lord. A sparrow cannot fall upon the land without God’s knowing about it. Sparrows were part of the diet of the poor. They were the cheapest of all birds. They sold for an assarion, which was the smallest Roman coin that was worth 1/16 of a denarius. Matthew suggests that even the sparrow is part of God’s providence. For the sparrow to fall must be part of God’s plan. Matthew reassures his community that they are worth much more than sparrows. What happens to God’s own people must be within God’s will.

Matthew does not suggest that God will end the suffering. He reassures his community that God will be with them in the midst of their suffering. What matters is not the pain in the present but one’s fate in the world to come.

The disciples should fear God, for only God has power over eternity. Fear of God liberates the disciples from fear of humans, who can only hurt the body and cannot touch their souls.

The disciples must shout their loyalty to Jesus from the housetops. That will inspire others to come forward and confess Christ. Houses in Palestine had flat roofs; people often used the roof as a patio. Roofs would have been easy to get to.

The truth is revealed in the end times. The disciples are being called to reveal the truth by preaching about Jesus. Those on the side of truth need not fear.

Matthew probably has in mind the final judgment, with Jesus’ sitting on the judgment throne, separating the sheep from the goats. Those who acknowledge Jesus

in front of men will be acknowledged by Jesus in front of his father in the heavens. Those who deny Jesus in front of men, Jesus will deny in front of his father.

Jesus says that he came not to cast peace upon the earth but a sword. Jesus' appearance causes a crisis that divides members of the household. Accepting or rejecting Jesus will divide family members. Matthew's community is already experiencing this division within their own families.

To cast peace upon the earth is a Semitic expression. The earth may mean the land of Israel. The age of peace has not yet dawned. Instead the last struggle has broken out. God will bring in peace with the new age.

There are words of judgment. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever fails to take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

The text concludes with more eschatology. Whoever finds his life in this world will lose it in the world to come, and whoever surrenders his life in this world will find it in the world to come.

Second Move: A Different Culture Map

This text is difficult for us today in part because people in the first century had a different culture map that we have today. Richard Nelson, an Old Testament scholar, points out that all people structure their world through a culture map. Reality is too complex to make sense of unless we view it through a lens that helps discriminate among all the data that we receive. Most people are binary thinkers, dividing reality, space and time into pairs of opposites: hot/cold, darkness/light, male/female, good/evil, friend/stranger.

In the first century Jewish thought was heavily influenced by eschatology and Hellenism. The dominant binary pairs on the map were the eternal and the temporal and body and soul.

We have a different culture map today. Western culture, especially young people, seems to have given up on transcendence. There is a crisis of meaning. It is almost as if Western culture has flipped the Hellenistic values: the material is seen as more real than the eternal or the spiritual, which are now seen as supernatural or fantasy. There is a spiritual hole in people. We have lost a shared vision. The vision of previous eras is now seen as a vision that was imposed on the culture by white men, colonialists and capitalists. A unified culture has broken into identity groups. We celebrate diversity and the different life experiences of different cultural groups, but we struggle to find common purpose. We live today in the midst of relativism instead of unity.

In the material and relativistic world in which we live, boldly confessing Christ and proclaiming the kingdom are still good news.

Christ is the incarnation in Matthew's gospel. He is Emmanuel, God with us. In John's gospel, Christ is the Logos. Jesus makes an invisible God real to Christians. Jesus reveals what God is like.

Jesus helps us endure postmodernity, helping us to celebrate difference while bringing Christians together. We may have different visions of Christ, but we have Christ in common. That gives us a shared language.

Jesus also connects us with young people, many of whom are unchurched. Young people know and admire Jesus. It is Christians they have a problem with. Everyone has a need for transcendence and a spirituality that extends and deepens them. Everyone has a need for community that loves and accepts and liberates and challenges them. These are basic human needs.

Proclaiming the kingdom is still part of our mission. Matthew describes the kingdom most fully in the Sermon on the Mount. Turning the other cheek and loving the enemy are still challenges for us. Early Christians practiced nonviolence, but after Rome adopted Christianity, Christians outside of the monasteries and outside of a few groups like Mennonites and Quakers have relied on the sword of the state. Only with Gandhi and King have Christians tried to put Jesus' teaching on nonviolence into practice, and we are still in the infancy stage.

Third Move: Lifting Up the Good Parts of Eschatology

Proclaiming the kingdom will be a challenge unless we rework our understanding of eschatology. Jesus told the disciples in the first part of the missionary discourse that they would not finish taking the good news to all the cities in Israel before the Son of Man would come to bring in the new age. Two thousand years later, we are still waiting for the second coming of Jesus.

That may be a good thing. Eschatology brings out the dark side of God. In eschatological texts we always see a God of judgment who will save some people and destroy others.

Modern readers have difficulty with a God of judgment. The comfort that Matthew offers the church is problematic. It is difficult to reconcile a God of judgment with the images of God in the Sermon on the Mount, a God who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. It is difficult to reconcile with the teachings on nonviolence.

Matthew does not shy away from the dark side of God, but he doesn't want to reflect on it either. The focus is on our own courage and confession rather than on

dark statements about God. Matthew does not seek reflection on theological problems but uncompromising and courageous proclamation of everything that Jesus has commanded.

Matthew sees suffering is a necessary consequence of discipleship, but he doesn't glorify it. Suffering and persecution are the lifestyle of the master.

Matthew knows that the coming of Christ results in division and struggle. The most troublesome part of faith is the difficulties it brings: persecution by authorities, ridicule by friends, disapproval by families.

Eschatology is still helpful for faith today if we keep the good parts. First, eschatology takes sin seriously. It recognizes that the justice in the world, both economic justice and social justice, falls far short of God's vision of justice for humanity. Second, eschatology makes us aware that human visions of the good society are necessarily contingent. They are partial and incomplete. They favor certain classes and certain values and exclude others. Third, we never reach the eschaton. There is no second coming. There is no judgment day. Humans are perpetually striving to improve the quality of their lives and the quality of their society, but they never get to an end point where they say, "We have reached the kingdom in all its glory."

The eschaton is still a very useful ideal. It keeps us moving toward the kingdom, but it is like chasing the horizon. We never get there. It encourages us to look beyond ourselves.

We are living in a time of crisis that may feel like the end days to some people. We are in the midst of a pandemic, yet we have partisan divisions about how to approach it. People are protesting that Black Lives Matter in the streets of dozens of American cities. Racism and partisanship seems like incurable problems.

Shouting from the housetops sounds like the last thing we need. There are prophets all across the spectrum shouting already.

Eschatology assures us that there is a goodness at the heart of reality. Sometimes it is covered up and it is hard for us to believe that goodness will overcome evil.

Confidence and the courage of our convictions will see us through this crisis. We cannot hide Christ and his peaceable kingdom under a bushel basket. It is important now more than ever that we imitate Christ and the virtues he embodied: humility, compassion and wisdom. It is important now more than ever that we model the peaceable kingdom, responding to verbal aggression with patience and understanding.

We need truth and reconciliation, and truth must come before reconciliation. We could have truth and reconciliation commissions like South Africa had when it was emerging from apartheid. Let's set up commissions that explore racism in all its manifestations. Ask witnesses to testify about the effects that racism has had on their lives. Educate the whole nation about the Greenwood massacre. Purge all the references to the Civil War as a lost cause and shine a light on white terrorism that took the form of lynching. Put up roadside markers across the country at the site of every lynching. Shine a light on all the ways that racism has worked its way into our society.

Conclusion

We can't be afraid of the truth. The truth is our only hope of disinfecting ourselves from the sins of our past. We should shout it from the housetops. Then we can begin the hard work of reconciling people of all colors and casting peace upon the earth.

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