Sermon June 25, 2017

Matthew 10:24-39

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“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,   
and a daughter against her mother,   
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;   
and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

So what happened to “Honor thy father and thy mother?” Is Jesus really tearing apart the family unit here? If so, why?

To get a handle on this gospel passage it helps me to look at the context of when Jesus said these words. Jesus had just given his disciples authority to go out to the people and proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near!”, to cast out unclean spirits, and cure every disease and every sickness. He told his disciples to not take anything with them, but to trust in the hospitality of those they meet.

Jesus then empowers them for this mission: Do not fear anybody. For your life is very precious to God. I will be with you because you have the courage to acknowledge me before others.

What Jesus was aware of was that the mission he was sending them on would not be received well by all they met. Even members of the disciples’ own families would disavow them, bully them, and try to hurt them. Members of their own family would stand against them.

The sacredness of the disciples’ family unit will be tried. Not everyone will understand. They may even band against you.

Here’s a contemporary example of how wrong choices made by family members can be a powerful influence on those who choose to follow a different path. It’s from a recent article in the New Yorker magazine that talks about the increase of heroin and opioid addiction in small, rural towns.

“Peter Callahan, a psychotherapist in Martinsburg [an Appalachian town], said, ‘In tight knit Appalachian towns, heroin has become a social contagion. Nearly everyone I met in Martinsburg has ties to someone – a child, a sibling, a girlfriend, an in-law, and old high school coach – who has struggled with opioids. As Callahan put it, ‘ If the lady next door is using, and so are other neighbors, and people in your family are, too, the odds are good that you’re going to join in.’”

The pressure to conform to the lifestyle of one’s family is often overwhelming. Especially if our self-worth is tied to their approval.

The reason I cite this article is that it speaks to the power we give our family members, even when they are making wrong decisions. We give their voices power to lead us in the wrong direction.

When Jesus said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” he’s saying he’s come to use that sword to break us free from ties that keep us from following him. Whether those ties are outside or inside the circle of our family is no matter.

Yes, honor thy father and thy mother. Yet, to do so may mean breaking away from them when they lead us away from what is good and life giving. Or when our concern for a family member causes us such anxiety that we focus only on their needs, not our own, and we lose sight of what Jesus is calling us to do – trusting in his guidance.

In both cases, what ties us to unhealthy relationships like these is trusting that we have the ability to “make things right” rather than trusting God to do so.

The disciples were given the authority to go out to the people and proclaim the good news.

We too are given the authority to proclaim the existence of a better world; one where God finds each of us precious and valuable. That is the message we are commissioned to share, even with those who may not listen. Whether or not our message is received is not in our hands to control, it is in God’s hands.

Jesus did not come to keep the status quo. He came to heal those who are broken in body and spirit. He came to open our eyes to the ways we draw ourselves away from God and to show us how we can spot the kingdom of God right now in this world: where truth is spoken, where simple acts of kindness are offered, and when we breakaway from whatever is keeping us from loving and feeling that we are loved by God.

Jesus says, “…those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Those who look to others rather that to Christ for their self-worth or who prevent others from hearing Christ’s words, they are the ones who value only what they see, but not what brings true meaning to life.

Our destiny is so closely linked to Christ’s mission that to turn away means losing the only opportunity for true happiness.

For this is Christ’s promise to us - those who follow him will find the life they are meant to live, for he will be there to guide us always.