

Our First Priority

Matthew 10:28-39

June 22, 2008

I.

This is one of those difficult readings, isn't it? Remember when we were in elementary school and someone scraped their fingernails across the blackboard. It usually made most of us shudder or fidget. We wanted whoever was doing it to stop right away. Today's Gospel reading, if we just hear the words in a literal way, might cause a similar reaction.

How would Jesus' words be received if someone said them today? Here's a way to think about it. The country is in the middle of a presidential campaign. We've seen a lot of candidates and heard a lot of speeches. Now it's down to two, and some of the issues include the war in Iraq, the importance of family values, and the place of religion in our lives.

Imagine that one of the candidates said "I won't bring peace, I will bring more weapons," and then proclaimed that "national policy is more important than families, it might be necessary for them to be divided." And after that he said, "if you do not make my administration the most important thing in your lives, you will not be worthy Americans."

Would you vote for that guy? The political reporters would have a field day, wouldn't they? People would wonder what the heck that candidate meant. And then the "spin doctors" immediately would emerge and start trying to explain it.

This reminds me of the story about a family from a really rural area making their first visit to the big city. The father and his son checked in at a hotel while the rest of the family was elsewhere. Then they walked past the elevators. They never had seen an elevator before, and didn't know what it was. Well, just then an old lady with a cane hobbled towards the elevator, pressed the button and went inside. The door closed. They just stared at the elevator in amazement. About a minute later, the elevator door opened and out came a very attractive good-looking young woman. The father was dumbstruck, and without missing a beat turned to his son, and said, "Quick, go get your mother."

The father did not understand what he saw, did he? And the moral of this story is that sometimes it's very easy to draw the wrong conclusion from the facts and information right in front of us. We can miss the message.

II.

And missing the message is a distinct possibility with today's Gospel. On the surface it seems that Jesus has forgotten some of the other things he said in Matthew's Gospel. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you" (6:33). Or "Come unto me, all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (11:28). Was Jesus sending conflicting signals?

That sometimes happens with our kids, doesn't it? We tell them we love them, and then we say things they think are harsh and not very loving. But we know that we do it for their own good. We will see that today's Gospel is similar. It's not a very warm and fuzzy message for the world, but for believers it can be immensely reassuring.

We might start with reviewing two aspects of the setting at the time. First, we remember from last week's reading and sermon that Jesus was instructing his disciples as he prepared to send them out to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. In today's reading he still was instructing them. They had not gone out yet. Today's reading also was part of their marching orders.

This leads to the second point. The world into which the disciples were going was a dangerous place. Jesus was unpopular with powerful people, and he knew that those identified with him could be equally unpopular. The disciples would be watched by Romans, Gentiles, and Jews who opposed Jesus. Their work would be risky, and Jesus wanted them to understand the full extent of the commitment he required if they went out on his behalf. He used strong language to make his point.

But Jesus was not just warning the disciples for their own well-being. He also was giving them their talking points, so to speak, as they prepared to go out into a world of unbelievers. Several times in today's reading Jesus used the relative pronoun "whoever," or similar indefinite references to all people in a general sense. He said, for example, "Whoever denies me." "Whoever loves father or mother more than me," "Whoever does not take up the cross." "Those who find their life."

Jesus was speaking to the disciples then, and he intended to speak to us now. And in today's world, where it usually is a good thing to "look out for number one," today's Gospel tells us to take that down a notch. Perhaps we can look out for ourselves as number two, but Jesus is number one.

III.

Earlier I speculated that if a political candidate said things like Jesus said, the spin doctors would be out in force explaining what the candidate really meant. In a way, I'm going to do something like that today, but hopefully in a positive sense. I pray that I can faithfully elaborate on today's reading. And I will make my best effort to be true to Scripture and the totality of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus said four things that can be troubling. He said that he does not come to bring peace, but a sword; that he comes to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother; that whoever loves his family more than Jesus is not worthy of him; and that whoever does not take up his cross and follow him is not worthy of him.

Let's start with Jesus' reference to peace. He was describing temporary earthly peace, not the eternal peace that awaits the coming of his kingdom. He did not come just to calm things down for a while. We know from the world's bloody history that what we think is peace is actually nothing more than an interval between two wars. But Jesus did not come to stop wars and give us a political peace that only is defined by a brief absence of conflict. Jesus certainly is the Prince of Peace, but it is his peace, not ours, that he seeks.

And a sword will be part of that process. By sword, however, Jesus did not mean military weaponry because he did not come to be a conquering Messiah. The sword in this context was a symbol of God's Word that cuts through our own material attitudes and divides those who believe from those who do not. And this division is evident in the next two warnings Jesus gave.

He said that he would divide families, and that those who loved their families more than him were not worthy of him. Jesus was not anti-family. He was not trying to destroy family relationships. He knew well the commandment to honor our fathers and mothers.

But he also knew that division within a family could be inevitable when some members of a family accepted him and others did not. There was even division in Jesus' own family about him. We probably know of situations today where differences of opinion over matters of faith within a family have caused the very divisions of which Jesus spoke.

The point here was that being part of an earthly family is a consequence of birth, not choice. But being part of a Christian family is a matter of choice. And we cannot allow temporary

family allegiances to take precedence over an eternal relationship with our Lord and Savior. If members of our family do not accept him, we still are called to do so.

Finally, we come to his command to pick up the cross and follow him. This might seem to be a harsh image because we tend to think of a cross as a burden, or some tragedy or hardship. If someone tells us they have a cross to bear, we are likely to regard it in a negative sense and be thankful we do not have their problem.

That also is not what Jesus meant. He was not describing a cross that is forced upon us by difficult situations, but rather an intentional Christian discipline that we willingly accept as a way of life. In this sense the cross is not a burden but a blessing. Taking up our cross means getting our priorities straight. It does not mean that we give up our possessions, or jobs, or leave our families. Rather it means that we cannot put those things above him.

IV.

That can be a big order, especially in the context of our families. But we are not left to deal with it by ourselves. In fact, we cannot do it alone. That's why Jesus left the church behind. It's why we live in a community of faith and worship here at St. Thomas.

Through the church we can hear God's word, love our families, encourage them in the faith, and carry our crosses in a joyful way. Certainly, there is a cost of discipleship; a cost of being a Christian. And it involves shaping our values and priorities every day through prayer and worship, participating in the common life of our Christian community, and living into the truth of our Baptismal Covenant. When we do that we will know how Jesus loves us and wants to have a relationship with us through the Holy Spirit.

And that defines the basic point of this reading. Our relationship with God depends on our relationship with Jesus. That is the essence of Christianity. To those who are satisfied with the idea of God as some sort of cosmic being or higher force, but do not think it's necessary to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, today's Gospel is bad news. But for those who do know our Lord, the reading is not harsh or difficult at all, and indeed is the Good News.

V.

I said earlier that the stakes were high for disciples in Jesus' time. They still are high today, but in a different way. In America, people no longer are persecuted because of their religious views, but the consequences of acceptance or rejection of Jesus are the same. The basic principles Jesus set forth still are valid and do not change, although we apply them in a twenty-first century setting.

We still are called to put Jesus first, and not to let other relationships, even our family relationships, draw us away from the faith. We still are called to carry the cross, to give Jesus first priority in our lives, and to try to bring others to believe. If we do that, if we live in faith in this world, we will have gained eternity in the next. *Amen.*