

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Parish (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 25, 2023 (Proper 7, Year A)  
Matthew 10:24-39; Romans 6:1b-11

These are some harsh words from Jesus. If he were trying to encourage people to JOIN his MOVEMENT, this DEFINITELY wouldn't be the SALES pitch. But this is the THING about Jesus – he doesn't sugar coat or white wash the COST of our faith, the demands it requires, the toll it takes. He's very direct and he's very real.

We'd like to think that faith is easy, that our faith is all about US, that we can GET our sins forgiven, and NOT have it change our lives in ANY way. But that would be CHEAP grace, and Jesus was very clear that HIS WAY is NOT about CHEAP grace.

St. Paul was clear about it too. Listen again to his words in Romans: "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ...Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

That's what the great Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about in his book *The COST of DISCIPLESHIP*. He wrote, "It is COSTLY because it calls us to discipleship; it is GRACE because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their LIVES; it is grace because it GIVES them their lives. It is costly because it condemns sin; it is grace because it JUSTIFIES the SINNER. Above all, grace is costly because it was costly to GOD, because it cost God the life of God's SON -- 'You were bought with a PRICE' – and because nothing can be CHEAP to US which is COSTLY to GOD."

Bonhoeffer believed what he wrote. He lived in Nazi Germany, when the church was cooperating with Hitler out of fear. He saw Nazis doing terrible things, believing God was okay with it, worse, condoned it, blessed it. Bonhoeffer stood up for the truth, and eventually he was hanged in a Nazi concentration camp, just days before it was liberated by the Americans. He gave his LIFE for his FAITH.

But he was just one of THOUSANDS who have died for their faith. We call them martyrs. They remind us that Christianity is NOT about CHEAP GRACE.

Chrysostom was the patriarch of Constantinople in the fourth century. One time the Roman emperor had him arrested and charged with being a Christian. If Chrysostom did NOT renounce Christ, then the emperor would have the Christian leader banished from the kingdom. Chrysostom responded to the threat by saying that the emperor could not do so, "because the whole world is my Father's kingdom."

"Then," replied the emperor, "I will take away your life." To which Chrysostom said, "You cannot, for my life is hid with Christ in God."

Next threatened with the loss of his treasure, the saint replied, "You cannot, for my treasure is in heaven where my heart is."

The emperor made one last effort: "Then I will drive you away from here and you shall have no friend left." But again Chrysostom responded, "You cannot, for I have one Friend from whom you can never separate me. I defy you, for you can do me no harm."

Wow, that's like something out of a GLADIATOR movie. But Chrysostom's story is a TRUE story. Now, living as we do in the West, in a religiously-tolerant society, we'll probably never have to FACE a CRUCIAL moment like he did 16 centuries ago.

But we DO face TRIALS – temptations to hide our faith, ignore our commitments, or compromise our loyalties. We're tempted to deny we ever HEARD of Christ. We're tempted to deny his power over our lives. "Come on, everyone else is doing it!" "It will be fun. No one will ever know." We're forced DAILY to choose between the EASY way, the quick fix and the promise of popularity ... or the way of CHRIST. Those who choose CHRIST must do it not just with their LIPS, but ALSO with their ACTIONS.

That's where today's Gospel picks up. Jesus is instructing his disciples before their first mission. He has been telling them about all the dangers and hardships they might have to put up with, and ends by saying, in effect, "What do you expect? A disciple isn't greater than his teacher. So, if the world gives ME a bad time, it will give YOU a bad time too" (Matthew 10:24-25).

So what does Jesus do then? Sell them life insurance? Give them bullet-proof vests? Teach them self-defense tactics? Hardly. Instead he says, "Don't ever be AFRAID of your enemies and critics. Even though it's not obvious now, the truth will finally come out. So, speak up; shout it out" (10:26-27).

Uf-da. That's a tall order. We don't want to be HEROES, especially not RELIGIOUS ones. It's all WE can do just to get to CHURCH on Sundays, and we're supposed to be SHOUTING the word of God from the HOUSETOPS? No way. We ARE afraid.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He says, "STOP BEING afraid" (that's the force of the Greek here); "STOP BEING afraid" -- not just once but always. "Stop being afraid of people who can kill the body but not the soul." The point is, people can only hurt us TEMPORARILY, because LIFE comes from GOD. Even if they KILL us, God, the AUTHOR of life, will raise us. "Don't fear people; fear God" (10:28).

You see, contrary to popular opinion, Jesus is saying that the voice of other people is NOT the voice of God. We worry WAY TOO MUCH about what other people say or think about us and far too LITTLE about what GOD thinks of us. There's a saying that we would worry a lot less about what people think of us if we realized how SELDOM they DO. But we are on GOD'S mind ALL the time.

Jesus says, "Aren't sparrows the most common and cheapest bird around? Yet not even ONE of them dies apart from God your Father" (10:29). Not even one.

"And what about you?" Jesus asks. "God knows every hair on your head. You're much more valuable than any sparrow. So stop being afraid" (10:30-31). Isn't that amazing? God knows everything that we go through, everything that happens to us. He doesn't say that sparrows don't die, or that the hairs on our heads won't fall. Clearly. But he's saying that, even if we DIE, it doesn't happen APART from God. Even if we FEEL TOTALLY ABANDONED, even if our prayers don't seem to be answered, even if everything seems hopeless, God knows, and God cares.

Christians must speak out. We stand up for the truth, because that's who we are. And because it matters. It has an impact. It makes a difference.

In his book, Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman recounts a story of an American soldier in Vietnam. His platoon was hunkered down in the rice paddies locked into a firefight with the Vietcong.

The rice fields in Vietnam are often separated by an earthen beam, and on this day, a line of six Buddhist monks started walking along the elevated beam separating the field where the American soldiers lay hugging the ground and the field where the Vietcong were crouched.

The monks walked directly toward the line of fire, calmly and steadily. They didn't look to the left or to the right, they just kept walking. The soldier said this: "It was really strange because nobody shot at 'em. And after they walked over the beam, suddenly all the FIGHT was out of me. It just didn't feel like I wanted to do this anymore, at least not that day. It must have been that way for everybody, because everybody quit. We just stopped fighting."

Of course, I can't say WHAT any of us are CALLED to do at this moment. I can only say that anyone who chooses to walk with God may well be COMPLETELY OUT OF STEP with the expectations of your co-workers, or your friends, or your family. Sometimes, it seems, God's people are called to walk right through the field of fire, faithfully, sacrificially, loyally, doing what we have been called to do. Because it matters. Because it makes a difference.

I'd like to close with the Prayer of St. Ignatius:

Lord Jesus, teach me to be generous,  
teach me to serve you as you deserve,  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labor and not to seek reward,  
except that of knowing that I do your will. Amen.

St. Ignatius of Loyola