

Of Fear and Trust and Fathers

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Coming into this passage for this morning, as I prepared during the week, was a bit of a different experience. As I read this scripture, I think I misunderstood how it was intended. This is really an example of how we should read our Bible consistently and repeatedly. Because each time we read our Bible, things change. The words don't change. But we change. We learn more and we gain more experience that feeds into our perceptions. When that happens, how we gain insight from scripture changes. We find a whole new meaning in passages we may have read a hundred times before and gotten little out of.

For me, what happened with the scripture is understanding dawned on me. As I was first reading the passage, I was seeing just random bits of advice coming from Jesus Christ. I broke it down in my head to several different small lessons. This is what it looked like in my head:

- Students should not work to be greater, but rather emulate the master (Matt. 10:24-25a)
- Beelzebul's house will tear itself apart (Matt. 10:25b).
- Don't fear, for secrets will come to light and all will be revealed (Matt. 10:26).
- Don't keep the good news to yourself but proclaim it loudly (Matt. 10:27).
- You don't need to fear mortals, but rather fear the spiritual enemy (Matt. 10:28)
- How God values the sparrows compared to how God values you (Matt. 10:29-31).
- Acknowledge me before others and I will acknowledge you before God (Matt. 10:32-33).
- I have not come to bring peace, but division (Matt. 10:34-39).

Any one of these topics are enough to provide fuel for a sermon each on their own. It seemed Jesus was just throwing random bits out at his disciples. Perhaps this section in the gospel is really just a collection of Jesus' sayings. Yet, in the lectionary readings for today they are brought together. So, I left them there and pondered during the week which snippet of this passage I would pull out.

It was when I came back and read it again, days later, that I realized these random lessons really are one coherent message of encouragement for the disciples. I looked at where we were in Matthew's telling of the gospel story. It's just after last week's lesson, where Jesus has looked out at the crowds and saw a people harassed and helpless, and he had compassion for them. Jesus turned to his disciples and told them to pray for workers for the harvest because the laborers were so few. As if in response to that very prayer, Jesus gave authority to the disciples to cast out evil spirits and to cure every illness and disease.

It is at this pivotal moment we meet Jesus and his disciples today. This morning's passage is a continuation of the story after Jesus has just given that authority to the disciples. Now Jesus is encouraging the disciples for the challenges they will face on the path ahead. Jesus is also acknowledging in plain truths the hardships of life as a disciple. What Jesus is doing is putting it all out in front, giving the disciples all the information and wisdom they need to hold fast to the mission.

When we read it all as one statement, it becomes a pep talk of sorts. Jesus is the head coach telling his players the game ahead is going to be a tough one. But if they stay focused on the game and remember how the coach had trained them, there's no stopping them.

Jesus starts out by telling the disciples they need to learn and put into practice the truths Jesus is teaching them. They can't just coast through, but rather they need to work towards living lives that emulate Jesus. Jesus is saying, "Live by this code of love for all."

Jesus continues, "Be aware that if you live this life, and they say such terrible things about me; like calling me the devil, how much worse will they say and do to you who follow me? Be prepared for that. But don't worry about their words. You don't need to be afraid of what they say. Everything will be brought to light and all truth will be revealed. Even the secrets of your slanderers. So don't keep secret what I share with you when no one else is listening. Proclaim what I tell you. Share it with the world with enthusiasm.

"You don't need to worry about those who threaten you because of me. You don't need to worry about those who come at you in violence, ready to take your life. The truth I give you to share goes beyond this life and these bodies. It's a matter of the soul. Those who would threaten you do not have the power to destroy your soul like the evil one. Your soul is safe in my care.

"Look at it this way. In all of creation a sparrow is given such little value by humans. Two are sold for but a penny. Yet, your Father in heaven provides for the sparrows' needs day in and day out. You are worth so much more, loved so much more by your Father in heaven than the sparrows. You are loved so much even the hairs on your head are all counted.

"As you go about know this. If you acknowledge me, if you walk by my teachings, if you live in the code of love that I give you, I will not forget you and I will remember you in my kingdom. I will stand by your side and be your advocate when the time comes.

"As you go out into the world, as I send you forward, know also this. What I teach, some will hate. The love I nourish you with, others will reject. And that will bring division even in the most intimate of relationships. When this happens do not lose sight of the path. Walk steadfast with me. For I bring a hope that outlasts this life. I bring a love that transforms. I love you. You should show my love to the world."

It's one coherent statement of encouragement from Jesus Christ.

We come into this world today with so much going on. There is so much fear that it can be paralyzing. There is fear of disease which causes personal and social anxieties to build up. That anxiety is paralyzing to some. There's fear of what's going on racially. How far will social unrest go? There is fear of and frustration with inconsistency in our own leadership. There is fear of tomorrow and the changes it will bring.

Well, the disciples in their day had those same types of fear. They feared what God would do in terms of blessings and curses. Would God punish for unknown sins or sins of the parents (often in the form of illness or ailment), or would God provide. They were fearful of the Roman government. There was, on one level, a racial tension there as a Southern European power stood

over and against a small Middle-Eastern nation state. On another level, there was the political tension inherent in the reality of Rome holding militarily imposed imperial control over Judah. Add to that the different factions forming within Jewish circles; Pharisees, Sadducees, and zealots. There was fear of becoming sick and dying from infections and viruses we've since developed cures and vaccines for over the past 2,000 plus years.

In the midst of all these fears, Jesus is preparing his disciples to go out and offer divine love to the world around them, preaching the good news that the Kingdom of heaven is near. Jesus is giving his disciples the encouragement they need. He is letting them know up front what they are up against, while giving them every reason not to fear.

This being Father's Day, I want to ask you to ponder this question. Is there that person in your life who filled that space of Father, or Dad, or "Old Man," or Papa? Is there that person in your life who has done this work of encouragement for you? Who was the person in your life while you were growing up who told it to you straight?

"Hey, I'm not gonna sugar coat things," they might have said. "Life is gonna be rough. You're gonna have challenges. The world is gonna come at ya. There will be struggles and you will get hurt. It's gonna be real. But you can do it. You are strong enough to handle it. You have all the intelligence and the potential to make this world great. You have the ability and the heart to change the world. Because you matter. Because you are loved. You are special. You are important. And I'm proud of you."

How many of us have had that person in our lives?

Again, it doesn't have to be our biological father. I know that not everybody has the best of relationships with their biological father, if they even have a relationship at all. There are people who don't know their biological father. They may not get along with their biological father. They may want nothing to do with their biological father. Maybe there isn't a good male role-model available and the person who fills that space is a woman. In this day and age of varying gender identities, the person who fills that space for you may not even identify as male and therefore doesn't consider themselves to be a father.

But there are people who have stepped into that role and made that difference. There are people who, just like Jesus Christ with his disciples, gave such needed emotional nourishment and encouraged us to the point where we succeeded. They gave us inspiration and challenged us to learn. When we fell down, they gave us the strength and the resilience to get back up; scraped knees, bruised egos and all. We got back up because someone was there to tell us we were strong enough to do it. We learned and adapted and got better because someone saw in us the ability to grow and self-improve, the will to learn, the adaptability to change, the conviction to be the difference in the world.

In this passage Jesus is sharing that same sentiment with his disciples. "I have called you. I have given you authority. I will let you know up front, this is what you're going to face. But I believe in you. I am proud of you. You are able. You have the voice and the ability. So go, love the people. Share the good news. Shout it from the roof tops. Don't be discouraged if a friend or

family turns away from you. In me, and with your brothers and sisters in Christ, you have family. Go and show a love that changes someone's life for the better.

We have that opportunity in our world around us each and every day. It's that opportunity to share love. It's the opportunity to be the voice of change. It's the opportunity to allow space for others to get back up when they have fallen, or after they have been knocked down, and have their voices heard. We have these opportunities each and every day.

In our current social situation with racial tensions escalating we have that opportunity to trust in and offer Christ's encouragement. Listen to the voices of the oppressed. Listen to voices of minorities. Allow their stories, their pain, the reality they live in each day to be proclaimed.

With the COVID-19 pandemic we have the opportunity to trust in and offer Christ's encouragement. Listen to the voices of those who have been affected by the virus firsthand. Listen to the voices of doctors and nurses. Proclaim love from the roof tops.

Listen to the voices that speak for change and healing. Be the voices that speak for change and healing. And do not let the voices of division slow you down. Do not let words of hate keep you from spreading love. Do not let that which can kill the body discourage you... because our mission and our purpose goes to the very soul. It goes for salvation and redemption. It goes to create a better world, not just for us, but for generations to come.

Proclaim the good news. Encourage one another. Support one another. Teach on another. Emulate the master. Emulate Jesus Christ who taught us what love truly is.

In Jesus' name, Amen.