

“ALL IS NOT WELL”

Matthew 10:34-42

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A; Proper 8)

July 2, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 10, verses 34 through 42. It is on page 688 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus says some things we probably don't want to hear. But whether or not we want to hear them is irrelevant. Please stand as you are able for the gospel lesson. From Matthew 10, we begin reading at verse 34.

³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

⁴⁰ “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. ⁴¹ The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

All is not well. We need an honest assessment of reality. We need an honest assessment of the world around us. And we need an honest assessment of ourselves. Both around us and within us, all is not well.

Things are not the way we want them to be. We long for peace and security, but it isn't always there. And when we hear God's Word, we want it to proclaim prosperity and ease of life. But sometimes it doesn't do that. When we look around and see disasters, broken families, death, destruction, persecution, poverty, and ongoing tragedies everywhere, we want God to simply snap his fingers and make it all better. Basically, we would like heaven at the drop of a hat.

We're probably realistic enough to realize that *heaven* at the drop of a hat isn't going to happen. But something along those lines—something in the direction of peace and prosperity—that would be nice. So if a prophet comes along preaching peace and security, we kind of want that message to be true, especially if he throws in some prosperity. We might listen to it and believe it, simply because we want it to be true. But, as the old theologian Mick Jagger taught us, “You can't always get what you want.”

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We saw this in the Old Testament lesson. The nation of Judah was in a tough spot. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had captured the holy city of Jerusalem. He took Jeconiah, the heir of the throne, many of the other rulers, and the vessels used in the service of the temple off to Babylon. The people of Judah were in dismay. Their political and religious hopes were crushed. So a prophet by the name of Hananiah comforted the people by saying, *Don't worry; within two years, all these people and holy vessels will be returned* (Jer. 28:3-4). This is what the people wanted to hear.

Now it wasn't really true, and it was contrary to what the prophet Jeremiah had spoken, but Jeremiah still replied to Hananiah by saying, "Amen! May the LORD do so." (Jer. 28:6) Jeremiah would love nothing more than to see the fortunes of Judah returned. But that wasn't the message God allowed him to proclaim. So Jeremiah gave them all a brief history lesson, reminding them that the ancient prophets "prophesied war, famine, and pestilence" (Jer. 28:8). Bad news was the typical message of a prophet. These were, most often, the genuine prophecies. But, "As for the prophet who prophecies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet" (Jer. 28:9). In other words, you shouldn't expect to hear what you want from a prophet. If someone comes in the name of the LORD, telling you what you want to hear, that person is probably wrong until proven innocent.

In the end God will bring peace to his people. The Scriptures make that abundantly clear. But there will be plenty of distress along the way. We should not expect peace and prosperity and ease of life, at least, not before the Second Coming of Jesus.

And in true, prophetic fashion, Jesus teaches this very thing. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (10:34) Raise your hand if this is what you wanted to hear when you came to church today. ... I didn't think so. Anyone who raises their hand at this point just proves they weren't actually listening. We don't come to church to hear what we want. We come to hear the true and authoritative Word of God, whether we like what it says or not. If we just want to hear what we want, we should all stay home and talk to our bathroom mirrors. But we come to hear the truth, and Jesus gives it to us: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

So this sounds kind of strange. Don't we call Jesus *The Prince of Peace* (Is. 9:6)? And didn't the angels at Christmas say something about "Peace on earth, Good will toward men" (Luke 2:14)? The truth of the matter is Jesus *does* bring peace to earth. But it doesn't come when or how we want. Heaven doesn't come at the drop of a hat. There must first be a sword.

Now that sounds unpleasant. Swords cut things apart. And the thing Jesus specifically mentions that gets cut apart is the family. "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" (10:35).

Now, setting a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, some people might say that's not very hard to do. But "a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother," that's a little more difficult. Family bonds are—or at least should be—the most difficult bonds to break.

The closest bond among human beings is between husband and wife, who are "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). And the next closest bond is that between parent and child, because children come from that one flesh. So according to Scripture, the bond between husband and wife is the

closest. But I think the most difficult bond to break—at least in our society—is that between parent and child.

Now, there are certainly parents—fathers especially—who just want nothing to do with their children from the very start. And this is tragic. But assuming a parent actually engages in their child’s life from the beginning, that bond is extremely difficult to break. We see this all around us and perhaps even in our own families. Husband and wife might break up, and we chalk it up as something that just happens. But then both parents try, at least, to maintain their bond with their children. The bond between parent and child is the most difficult to break. But Jesus says he came to do it. And he did.

Now this sounds really strange. Why would Jesus want to break families apart? Well, he doesn’t. Jesus’ intention is not to break families apart. God instituted family and desires it to be whole. The reason families break apart is our inborn sinful condition. With regard to Jesus, the world, the flesh, and the devil have such hostility against him that it will destroy even the closest bond of parent and child.

When a parent or child believes in Jesus, but the other one doesn’t, that bond between parent and child can be strained. This isn’t a good thing, but it happens. We may not experience it so much in our pluralistic society, because, for better or worse, we’ve learned to not talk about religion at Thanksgiving. But at earlier times in history, or in other cultures today, confessing the Name of Jesus has caused many parents and children to be divided.

In Judaism, religion was a vital part of everyday life. If one family member believed Jesus was the Messiah and the fulfillment of all God’s promises and all their religious activity, but another family member did not believe it, they suddenly had an irreconcilable difference.

And Gentile Christians didn’t have it any easier. For the first several centuries of Christian history, Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire. In an empire where the emperor was believed to be divine, the confession of the Trinity as the one true God added up to treason. So family members, in an effort to be patriotic, might even turn in other family members to the government. Sometimes this even resulted in death.

And this same kind of persecution has continued, or even increased, down to the present day in certain Muslim, Hindu, or atheist cultures. A Muslim child, for example, who converts to Christianity will likely be disowned by his or her family. In some cases, the father may actually kill the child in what is called an “honor killing.”

Now some of this might still sound far-fetched in the United States, where we have freedom to live and practice our religion in peace. But in certain other parts of the world, this kind of persecution is a daily occurrence. So it makes any kind of hostility we think we endure seem like a trifling matter. But we should be aware of the dangers our Christian brothers and sisters face in other nations. And we should also know, the very same thing can happen anywhere—even here.

And I don’t say this as an observation of any political or cultural circumstances. It’s simply the recognition of the extreme opposition the world, the flesh, and the devil have against Jesus. The more the name of Jesus is proclaimed, the more evil will rage against it. That’s just the way it is in this fallen world. All is not well.

So why does Jesus warn us about this? When we hear this warning, I think our natural response is to try to figure out how to defend ourselves. That’s because we really don’t want

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the suffering to come. But if such suffering is to come, it will come, and there will be little or nothing we can do about it. So Jesus warns us about it, not so we can build walls to defend ourselves, but simply so we won't be surprised when it happens.

If our faith is based upon peace and prosperity in this life, it will crumble when suffering arrives, because that kind of faith will be proven false. But if our faith is looking to God's new creation, that's the kind of faith that will endure, because suffering in this life cannot take away our hope in the next.

So Jesus says, “Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (10:38-39)

If we call ourselves Christians, we should not be surprised if our lives follow the pattern of the one we claim to follow. Time and again Jesus uses the image of his death—the cross—to define the pattern of the Christian life. One of the defining marks of the Christian life is suffering.

So sometimes we talk about the various sufferings we endure as *our crosses to bear*. Sometimes they are serious things, but sometimes we call rather insignificant things “crosses,” like when the air conditioner in your car quits and you say, “Well, I guess that's just my cross to bear.” And maybe that's the extent of the suffering God places upon us because that's about as much as we can handle. If we expect God to give us peace and prosperity in this life, then that's about as much of a cross as we can bear. But we really shouldn't be surprised if our own personal crosses end up looking a lot like a real cross.

For many of the apostles and early Christians, this was no metaphor. The crosses they bore were literal crosses. And then as methods of execution changed, the cross has taken the forms of swords, guillotines, and guns. So if our own personal crosses do not take such a terminal form, we should consider ourselves blessed.

And if our crosses do take such a terminal form, we should still consider ourselves blessed. Because anyone who thinks they can take the life of one of God's dear children is deceived, because our lives are not our own. Our lives have been taken up by our Heavenly Father in his dear Son, Jesus Christ. There is nothing left here to take. No one can take your life from you if it doesn't belong to you anymore. Jesus says, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Dear Christians, consider yourselves to be dead already, because you have died in Christ. This is what the apostle Paul taught us in the epistle lesson: “Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God” (7:4). Paul is talking about your baptism here. That is where you were buried with Christ and raised with him (Rom. 6:2-11). So we should consider ourselves to be dead already, because we are. And we should consider ourselves to be alive again, because we are. And this is a life that not even death can take away from us.

So as we look around the world, and even as we look into our own hearts, we see that all is not well. This is the same thing God saw when he looked down on us. He saw a world where all is not well. And this is not something he could fix simply by snapping his fingers, at least, not without destroying those he loves. Because the evil is not only around us; it is within us. So God's solution could not be some fairy tale formula to magically make everything all better. The

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solution involved a cross. This was necessary. The solution involved God himself hanging on that cross, bearing the sin of the world in his own body.

And by virtue of your baptism, you were there with him. This is no lie. This is no metaphor. This is what the Scriptures clearly proclaim as true. By virtue of your Baptism, you were there with him. You were crucified with him. And if you have been crucified with him, you have also been raised with him. This is a life that not even death can take away from you, for as surely as Christ is risen from the dead, we will be raised the exact same way. Having lost our lives in him, we will most certainly find them again.

All is not well ... but it will be. As surely as Jesus Christ was crucified and has risen from the dead, it will be. All will be well. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.