

# RECEIVE THE WORD OF THE CROSS

Matthew 10:34-42

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

June 28, 2020

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. In this gospel lesson, Jesus keeps talking about the bad things his disciples will have to endure. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 10, beginning at verse 34, we read in Jesus' name.

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

<sup>40</sup> “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. <sup>41</sup> 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. <sup>42</sup> 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.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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I don't know about the rest of you, but I find this passage to be extraordinarily depressing. It's a continuation of last week's gospel lesson, where Jesus talked about his disciples being hated by all for his name's sake (10:22). He talked about them being persecuted (10:23). He talked about them being maligned (10:25). That is, people would speak evil about them, probably lies, in order to discredit them. They called Jesus “Beelzebul,” which is another name for the devil, and Jesus said his disciples would be maligned even more. Now when Jesus talks about this happening to his disciples, that includes you and me. That's why I find this passage to be so depressing.

The saving grace is that Jesus promises, “**The one who endures to the end will be saved**” (10:22). And in the reading for today he says, “**Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it**” (10:39). So, yeah, it might be hard, but in the end it will be worth it.

The trouble is: we're living now, not at the end. And in the end we might be strong. But right now, we're weak, or, at least, I am. So I find this passage to be extraordinarily depressing. I know we have to talk about suffering in the Christian life, because it is part of the Christian life, and it is a part of biblical teaching, but I kind of wish we could just talk about it once and be done with it. I'd rather go on to something more pleasant. I'm okay with having one sermon every few months where I have to preach to you about suffering for the sake of Christ, but I

don't want to do it back-to-back weeks. It's just easier to ignore if we only have to listen to it once. So, I suppose, maybe, this is Jesus' way of saying, "No, really; I meant all that stuff about being persecuted and taking up your cross."

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The world is not the way it should be. It's not the way we want it to be. We long for peace and security, but it's not always there. And when we hear God's Word, we want it to proclaim prosperity and ease of life. But it doesn't always 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, "You can't always get what you want" (Mick Jagger).

This is what the prophet Jeremiah dealt with. He, alone, prophesied doom and gloom upon Jerusalem. He prophesied that they would be carried off to Babylon. Meanwhile, there were several false prophets in Jerusalem who prophesied peace. And that's what the people wanted to hear, so Jeremiah was persecuted, even though he was right. Jeremiah teaches us not to trust the prophet who prophesies peace until that peace comes to pass (Jer. 28:9). It's easy to tell a person what they want to hear, so the one who tells us what we don't want to hear is more likely to be telling the truth.

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.

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Jesus says. "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).

So this sounds kind of strange. 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).

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 sinful nature. 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 societies 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. I imagine there were some pretty awkward Passovers in the first century.

And Gentile Christians didn't have it much easier. For the first several centuries of Christian history, Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire. In an empire where the emperor was hailed as a god, the confession of the Trinity as the one true God amounted 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 countries. Those who convert to Christianity are often disowned by their families. In some cases, they are even killed.

This might still sound far-fetched in the United States, where we have freedom to live and practice our religion in peace. But in some parts of the world, this kind of persecution is a regular 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 that the very same thing can happen anywhere—even here. 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.

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So why does Jesus warn us about this? When we hear this warning, I suspect our natural response is to try to figure out how to defend ourselves. That's because we really don't want the suffering to come. But if such suffering is to come, it will come, and there is little or nothing we can do about it. So Jesus warns us about it, not so we can build forts 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.

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.

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. But we really shouldn't be surprised if our own personal crosses end up looking a lot more 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 also taken the forms of swords, guillotines, and guns. 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" (Rom. 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.

**"Whoever loses his life for [Jesus'] sake will find it."** To lose your life for Jesus' sake means that it becomes his. Our lives belong to God. We have lost them to him. But this is good, because he is the only one in the entire universe who can protect them. To lose your life into his hands is the safest thing ever. Our lives are not safe unless they are in Christ.

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Jesus teaches his disciples about taking up their crosses. Then he tells them, and he also teaches us in the process, what will happen if people receive their teaching. **"Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me"** (10:40). He goes on also to talk about the one who receives a prophet or a righteous person and how they will receive the reward of a prophet and of a righteous person.

He's talking about justification by faith and how that faith comes through hearing. Do you see what I mean? What do the hearers do to receive the prophet's reward or the righteous person's reward? Nothing. They simply receive the Word. They hear and believe.

The prophets and the apostles all came preaching the cross. They proclaimed suffering. Jeremiah preached the cross. He prophesied of Israel's suffering, that is, being taken into captivity in Babylon. He also prophesied of perfect redemption. He prophesied of a new covenant, one in which God would forgive their sins and remember them no more (Jer. 31:34). Those who received his message of discipline also received his message of forgiveness, while those who rejected his message of discipline did not receive the message of forgiveness.

The apostles did the same. They preached the cross. They proclaimed Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. And they also preached that the cross is for all Christians.

So how will we receive the Word of the Cross? Will we accept the cross as a reality in our lives, or will we only be content with Jesus bearing the cross? If we think the cross is only for Jesus, and not also for us, our faith will fail when the cross comes to find us. Whether we want to believe it or not, the cross is for each of us.

The key is to find our life in the cross. Jesus' cross is where we have already died with Christ, and if we have died with him, we will also be raised with him (Rom. 6:5). If we lose our lives in the cross of Jesus, we will find our lives in his resurrection.

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When we look around the world, and even as we look into our own hearts, we see sin, death, and evil. This is the same thing God saw when he looked down on us. He saw a world of corruption. 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 through your baptism, you were there with him. This is no lie. This is no metaphor. This is what the Scriptures clearly proclaim as true. Through 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 in him. Amen.

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He who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21).