

“Amping The Faith” – Proper 7 – Mt 10:24-39 – June 22, 2014

For the past several weeks now we’ve been looking at Matthew’s collection of Jesus’ teachings to his closest disciples and we’ve seen in those teachings a number of cautions about the kind of grief and strife they can expect. That theme continues in today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel and indeed we even hear it escalate. Prior to today’s reading Jesus has just elaborated in great detail the persecutions that His disciples can expect as He sends them out “like sheep into the midst of wolves” and now he goes even further to describe just how serious the persecution will become. “If the people are bold enough to call me, your leader, the Devil, what do you think they’ll call you?” Jesus warns them. Being called a servant of Satan when one is seeking to share the love of God is not something you can toss off with “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me”. As history has shown us, those who throw words to wound the spirit all too often move on to throw actual sticks and stones that do wound the body and worse.

At the same time Jesus tells his disciples “Have no fear, while you shout from the rooftops what I have told you in private.” “Oh sure, don’t be afraid ... easy for him to say”, we can easily hear the disciples murmuring to one another, as they picture just what kind of sticks and stones await them for antagonizing people the way Jesus wanted them to do. But Jesus did also reassure them, pointing out that instead of fearing people they should fear God himself who has all power over all places, things and peoples, who can even destroy both soul and body in hell.”

But then far from presenting God as the ultimate fearful character, Jesus continues with that sudden twist, that common-in-the-gospel turnaround of grace. Exactly how should the disciples fear this all-powerful God? With a panic-filled fear that somehow one misstep will result in loss of both soul and body in hell? Or with a fear that recognizes God’s incredibly tender care and concern for all of his creatures, even the humble two-for-a-penny sparrows? The latter is the case representing a fear described as an awe and a respect and a humbling gratefulness that recognizes that God views us as worth more than many sparrows.

So this whole section, while starting out with the frightening challenge of reality, is actually about reassurance and encouragement for the disciples and in turn for us. The sequence of sparrows->people->disciples->Jesus->God outlines an increasing progression in power and importance, but the inverted sequence God-Jesus-disciples-people-sparrows also shows the

direction of flow of the incredible river of grace, mercy, compassion and life-giving support. “God will not forget or abandon you”, Jesus reassures His disciples and thus reassures us. You will not fall through the cracks of God’s love, because there are no such cracks. God is so attentive to your life that even the number of hairs on your head is known to him (we who are losing hair can also be reassured ... there is nothing here that says your importance to God is a function of the number of those hairs, only that He cares so much for us that He even knows the count!) Can anyone doubt, then, the attention and care of God for those who love and serve faithfully?

However, were the disciples reassured, or were they wavering, trying to decide if they really wanted to be part of such strife and stress? Surely they had to know that they couldn’t roost on the fence, being non-committal and thus non-committed, because Jesus made it painfully clear what their choices were. “Confess, or deny”, those are your choices, Jesus spells out for them, in what seems the ultimate carrot/stick situation. It seems so clear here, confess or deny.

Indeed, that challenge seems so clear and simple that we tend to ignore it, hoping it will go away. It is a tough challenge and people in the church have been afraid of it since it was first issued. Worse yet, the fear inspired by this text has even been fostered and fomented by many unscrupulous people in the church who have used this text as a bludgeon or a heavy club to batter the faithful into meek and unchallenging obedience. Who would have thought that the church would be the very ones to persecute people claiming faith in Christ? But then who would have thought that faith would divide friends and families, causing even brother to betray brother to death? Well, Jesus did and said so.

I think perhaps the main reason we avoid this text is the fear that somehow if we make one slip-up in faith, if we somehow provide some demonstration that we are not sufficiently “with” Jesus, that will cause us to be automagically dumped into some Holy Recycling Bin, condemned for being “against” Jesus. Now if you have a bit of that fear working in you, I would suggest you look to the example here of one of the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking, namely Peter. Peter more than ‘stumbled’ in his faith, he outright denied Jesus – three times in one night, no less! And yet, far from losing body and soul and being doomed to live in Hell, Peter became the rock upon which Jesus founded His church. I’m sure Peter learned a valuable lesson in all of this, but I’m not so sure the church built upon him learned the lesson as well, for

we still have many in the church who take an overly-simplistic approach to this confess/deny dilemma. It seems so simple and clear here, confess or deny. Thank God, literally, “thank God!” that it is nowhere near so simple or simplistic for God and that His mercy and grace in Christ is adequate to cover three explicit denials and more.

Now, given that what Jesus taught his disciples privately would, when publicly proclaimed, cause such division, conflict, strife, family and societal disruption, the risk of prosecution, jail, physical harm and even violent and vengeful death, I just have to ask the question, “what was so bad about what He was teaching that would cause all that pain and anguish?” The answer is stunning, not only in its content but in the truth of what he foretold. The upsetting stuff that Jesus taught was about reconciliation, mercy, grace, acceptance and love. All dangerous and disruptive stuff, apparently, for it has caused untold misery, grief, pain and harm over the years. Whenever the church has spoken out prophetically, proclaiming equality before God and decrying oppression, society has risen up against the church and even done harm to those who would announce God’s grace, mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation.

People today still pay the price for declaring their faith. It doesn’t take much of a scratch by the church on the surface of the veneer of politeness to cause an upwelling and eruption of emotional diatribes against all kinds of perceived ‘evils’ and to unleash the forces of hostility against people. It still is a bit mind-boggling how much fearful reaction and hoopla is generated whenever the church attempts to proclaim publicly that which Jesus taught his disciples first in private; lessons about breaking social boundaries to talk with compassion to a woman at a well, to eat with and touch and heal with words of kindness the outcasts of society; to warn the overly-righteous about their rejection of God’s people; to proclaim God’s love, compassion, mercy and grace.

That negative reaction from secular society may be the main reason that much of the church, especially in North America, drifted into a ‘comfort zone’ of a non-professing faith, a kind of religious social club whose main objective was to avoid rocking the boat so that nobody would be offended and leave – after all, membership, being counted among the “ins”, was the most important thing. The problem with such a non-professing faith is that it isn’t worth a whole lot. In fact it is worth so little that it not only fails to attract negative attention, it fails to attract any attention at all and dies a slow, lingering death.

But there are an increasing number of congregations who practice a 'full-value faith', who proclaim their faith in Christ loudly and from the rooftops with their loving actions toward the hungry, the poor, the homeless, the outcast, the marginalized, the hated in society. I believe we can count ourselves among them. Our faith is not perfect, nor does it need to be. We stumble and we learn and we grow, two steps forward and one step back, the same as the first disciples did. But we do proclaim our gratitude to God for His love and saving grace for us in Christ and we do proclaim it in our outreach and ministry in Christ's name and we give thanks to God and Christ for the Holy Spirit who enables and uplifts us in that proclamation. I'm certain that the smell of sausages and pancakes and maple syrup being served once more this morning to singles and seniors and street people rises to God as pleasing as any incense one could offer and proclaims above even the rooftops our acknowledging of Christ, in whose name we offer all that we do.