

LOVE YOUR LIFE AND LIVE

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Psalm 86

Matthew 10:24 – 39 ~ Jesus warns his disciples of the conflict he has brought to the world.

The 10th chapter of Matthew's gospel begins with the naming of Jesus' 12 disciples and the instruction he gives them for their first missionary adventure. The verses in today's reading continue Jesus' instruction to the disciples. Today's gospel reading provides an example of Christ's more difficult teachings. The message of Christ comes, as it says in Revelation, as a two-edged sword. It brings comfort and peace to those who desperately need it. It also brings discomfort and conflict to those who think they have it all together. "My yoke is easy and my burden is light," Jesus says (Mt. 11:30). In the previous chapter of Matthew, Jesus healed a paralytic, called Matthew who was considered a less than desirable one to a new way of life, healed a woman with a twelve year blood flow, healed a couple of blind men, and to top it off, raised a young girl from the dead. Not a bad day's work for one whose occupation is to bring hope and life. But, here, Jesus tells us that he comes not to bring peace, but a sword. And he tells us that he has come to set a son against his father, and a daughter against her mother. This is strong language; not what we'd expect to hear on Father's Day.

What is it about God's message that is so contrary that it drives faithful people to despair? It is, simply, this: the gospel is message the world, by and large, does not want to hear.

The gospel is, to be sure, good news to some. In his inaugural address, recorded in Luke, Jesus says he comes to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. That is good news for those who are oppressed, bound or blind. But, most of us are not; at least not physically. It is good news, too, for those who acknowledge that they are psychologically oppressed, or bound by broken relationships, or blind to the light of Christ. Good news, for those who repent and seek God's help in being restored and made whole.

But the gospel is bad news, lousy news, offensive news for those who are of the world, and do not know of their need to be made new in Christ.

When Matthew gathered these words into his gospel, he had a church to uphold that was being ostracized by the Jewish synagogue.

Why was the message of Christ so offensive to them? Because he called for people to change. Not to live according to law but according to love. To be inclusive, to be willing to touch the mess of humanity in order to share God's love. To sink one's hands into the filth of poverty, into the open wounds of disease, into the white, leprous folds of decaying skin. To sit beside the smug, rank one who continually breaks relationship, to share a meal with that one, to ask that one to pass the bread and then eat it when it comes to you from a greasy hand.

Or to smile at a sex trade worker and offer the possibility of dignity; to look at her and not see her painted face and what she has done in the past but to look at her and see a

promising future. Jesus called for change and when his followers lived a new kind of life, they got a lot of trouble for their efforts.

In our day, Christians in North America are not often persecuted or ostracized for their faith in Jesus. Perhaps in a small way we are, like the funny looks you get when you fold your hands and bow your head at a restaurant. But, most of us do not know real persecution. Maybe we would have more of a cross to bear if we proclaimed the gospel more boldly. “What you have heard in secret, proclaim for the housetops,” Jesus instructed.

What is it that we should shout? The same message that has always gotten Christians into trouble, that Jesus calls the world to change. To live by love, to forgive one another, to seek justice, to be agents of reconciliation. To give up the stuff of this world and give ourselves to its people. To seek out those without friends and offer them a place at your table. To avoid the charms of life and seek the challenges. To look hard into the face of temptation and stare it down. To fight for the one whose arm is weak; to say no to self and yes to sacrifice. To believe in the one who comes from God, who is God, and who will never settle for a world that is unrepentant. If we were to shout a little of that from the rooftops, we might find ourselves on the outside of society and shunned by family and friends. If we talk about that kind of life, the world might hate us for it.

Our world too has a different view of life. And it doesn't want things upset! It's not a way of life that leads to living. It is living that leads to death. Live so you will die, that is what the world says to us in countless ways. “Those who find their life will lose it,” Jesus warns.

How, then are we to gain our lives? “Those who lose their lives for my sake will find it” Jesus assures us. Bearing a cross suggests some form of death. It might be the death of giving up the world. It might be the death of persecution or separation. In some parts of the world, it might even be the genuine loss of life for proclaiming the gospel. Will Willimon writes of a seminary classmate of his from a country in North Africa who returned to his homeland upon graduation not to be greeted by family and friends. He was met at the airport by armed guards who took him immediately to jail to ensure that he did not undertake the proclamation of the gospel.

The two-edged sword of the gospel cuts deeply to those who heed it today. Yet, still, it cuts both ways. For the godly life is not just a life of separation and sacrifice. It is also a life of fullness and satisfaction. We die to the seductive ways of the world so that we will live. We proclaim a contrary message that is filled with faith, and honesty and compassion, and freedom and justice and love and life. If we buy into this, we will live and we will live forever.

As well as today being Father's Day, this particular Sunday is named as First Nations Sunday being that it is the Sunday closest to June 21, which has been named as First Nations Day of Prayer. June 21 has been observed in many Native communities in North America as the Nations Indian (or Aboriginal) Day of Prayer. It is traditionally a sacred time marking the summer equinox and coming of new growth.

The United Church's 24th General Council invited non-Native congregations to annually recognize this as a traditionally sacred day among First Nations. The 34th General Council reiterated this invitation in the light of the 1992 activities to observe the 500 years of contact in the Americas between Europeans and Indigenous peoples. In the 1996 the federal government also proclaimed this a national day of celebration and

reflection on the history and contributions of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. This year, non-Native congregations are invited to be proactive in supporting the United Church goal of supporting right relationships with Native peoples.

Almost two years ago staff from Saskatchewan Conference, the Calling Lakes Centre, and Treaty 4 offices in Fort Qu'appelle, Saskatchewan, came together for event to explore "right relationships."

The presentation by a Treaty 4 representative led to discussions about the spiritual understanding of the making of a treaty. An Elder from Fort Qu'appelle staff described the history of the Treaty 4 negotiations...

In 1874 the Government of Canada sent a team of treaty negotiators to Fort Qu'appele, but the treaty negotiators were frustrated by the slow process: the First Nations leaders withdrew for ceremony and prayers before they could be involved in the treaty process. They understood this was a sacred, spiritual agreement that required spiritual preparation. They understood the process involved three parties: the primary component of the First Nations and Canada coming to an understanding was the acknowledgement that the Creator held the promise of peace and sharing.

Within the first decade after Confederation seven treaties had been signed: they covered the territory from Lake Superior to the Rocky Mountains. Their strategy was to move settlers in large numbers onto "free land" and the treaty – making would allow for western development. In 1878, the Minister of Indian Affairs, Sir John A. MacDonald, was responsible for a policy that focused on the "civilization" and "enfranchisement" of Indians. Residential Schools were one of the results.

Twenty years ago, many courageous voices shared stories of their abuse within the residential schools that were run by the churches. Tears were shed! Many sat stunned in silence! Many were stirred to action! That is they chose to live out the hard words of today's gospel.

Twenty years ago the United Church offered an apology and it was accepted by our Native brothers and sisters. Twenty years later we are still trying to live out the words of that apology, and it is still difficult. The event of this past week - the alleged racism and prejudice expressed in words by members of our police force show us just how difficult it is. When the community of Hobbema hits the news, I'm sure we each have our own individual thoughts and again we know how difficult it is to live out that apology and build "right relationship."

The difficult teaching of Jesus we heard today calls us to build and live in "right relationship" everyday, with everyone. On this particular Sunday we are called to focus on our First Nations peoples. Recognize that building right relationship takes time, patience, respect, sensitivity, and justice and it does mean losing life as the world knows it and finding life in another. Let us have the courage to do so trusting that God walks with us always. Amen.