

Matthew 10:34-42 – Jesus Comes with a Sword

If today's reading had come one week earlier, then the Holy Gospel for today would have been proclaimed on Father's Day. That would have made, I think, for some interesting sermons. That on that day set aside to honor earthly fathers, we would have heard Jesus say: **"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father."** And then we would have heard even more: **"and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."** Happy Father's Day!

This is not the kind of Jesus many people are used to hearing about. Or honestly, the kind of Jesus many people want. These are shocking words, and words that, perhaps, make us uncomfortable. Which is why they're good. These words today challenge us, make us think, and force us to consider: What is our faith all about? We are in the long, green Pentecost season, with its focus on growing in the Christian life and faith, these words set the tone for us. The Christian life may not always be what we think, and it surely will not always be easy. For Jesus is the Prince of Peace who comes with a sword.

Now, to be clear, Jesus is not anti-family. Families were His idea, beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve and His command to them to **"be fruitful and multiply."** Families are gifts from God, protected by no less than three of the Ten Commandments. (That would be the fourth, sixth, and tenth, in case you were wondering.)

But what comes first? Family, or the truth of God's Word? It would be wonderful if that choice didn't have to be made, and if that's true about your family, consider yourself blessed. It would also be wonderful if we could speak the truth of God's Word with our family and remain family – but so often, that's not the case. God's Word is a sword that divides. And so instead of speaking the truth, we compromise it, or remain silent, to keep peace in the family. It isn't right, we know. But it's easier. Maybe another time ... but another time never seems to come.

And then what does Jesus say? **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. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.** And we know we are not worthy. Not even a little. The cross is hard, and it's dangerous, and we're scared. Oh, we make a good show of it here in church, where it's safe. We sing hymns like "Lift High the Cross" and confess our Creeds and vow to be faithful even unto death, but then we walk out those doors and what happens?

Jesus is the Prince of Peace who comes with a sword – a sword that, if you're like me, is piercing your heart right now. That's good. Repent. Just as doctors use scalpels and cut in order to heal, so the Word of God cuts in order to heal. And so Jesus cuts in order to heal. He exposes the sin, to heal with His forgiveness. He is here to make the unworthy worthy, and to give you peace. Not peace with the world, but peace with God. That though your family relationships are important, you do not find your life in them, but here in Christ. In His death and resurrection that gives you life now and life forever.

For in truth, that sword that pierces you now, first came down upon Jesus on the cross. It came down upon Him because of all our unworthiness, all our compromise, all our silence, all our paralyzing fear, all our sin He took upon Himself, to bear its penalty for you and me in your place. To set you free and give us life. Freedom and life that are found only in Him.

Now you know that. But still it's hard, isn't it? It was hard for the prophet Jeremiah to faithfully speak God's Word. Other prophets were telling the people what they wanted to hear and so they didn't like old Jeremiah very much – and they let him know it. St. Paul also, we heard, could not free himself from the grip of sin that plagued him every day. And for us, too, every day is a battle against the sin and fear and unbelief that lives in our hearts, that tells us Jesus and Word are not enough. That we cannot quite let go of the world. We cannot quite let go of our lives.

But listen to what St. Paul said about this; about this everyday battle we face. He said: **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.**

Paul speaks there of a new and different reality, that came to be in your baptism, where you were joined to Christ in His death and resurrection. That in baptism, you die and belong to another. That in baptism you die to the law and its condemnation; you die to that which you cannot let go of; you die to sin and its power; you die with Christ and are raised with Him, that set free from sin, you belong to Him and live in Him.

Now, Paul doesn't mention baptism here in these verses we heard today, but he's been talking about it this way all through the previous chapter, and so those who heard this letter knew this is what he was talking about – the baptismal life. That baptism is dying and rising with Christ. That baptism is receiving a new life in Christ. That baptism is your new birth into the family of God.

The family of God! You see, that's the key to understanding these verses of our Gospel lesson for today. By virtue of your baptism into Christ, there's a new family to which you belong. A new family that transcends the bounds of time and space. A new family that will not last just for a time, but for eternity.

So even though the world will tell you that blood is thicker than water – that our earthly family relationships create a kind of bond that should not be broken by the things of this world that, by comparison, are like water ... but Jesus is teaching us that the truth is exactly the opposite. For in our new family, our new life, water is thicker than blood. The water and Word of Holy Baptism creates a bond that is greater than any other on earth – not just a bond that we have with each other, but the bond that we have with each other by virtue of our being united in Christ. It is Christ that holds us together, Christ who gives us hope, Christ who by His blood gave power to this water, Christ who makes us all brothers and sisters and children of our heavenly Father in Him.

And so in Christ we have a family and life that we cannot lose. Not because we're so great, or because there won't be any strife and disagreements in the church – there will be! We're still sinners. But because we are united in the One who is greater than our sin, who gave His life to give us life. And so it is exactly in losing your life in baptism, losing your life in repentance, losing your life in service, losing your life in Christ – you find a life that is even greater. A life that will have no end.

That's why Jesus ends these words as He does, by talking about receiving His apostles, His prophets, His righteous ones, His children. These are those who speak His life-giving, family-creating Word. These are those who belong to Christ and are our family of faith. To receive them is to receive Christ and His Word. His Word by which we are born from above and given faith, are kept in that faith, and are given the reward of that faith – the gift of eternal life.

That's why this baptismal font is front and center in our church. When walk up to this altar, you must go by it. So that it reminds you that this is why you're here; that water is thicker than blood. That no matter what happens in this world, no matter the divisions and struggles, no matter the sin and death – nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He has claimed you as His own, and you are His. Born again into His family. Or as St. John would later proclaim: **“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are.”**

That is what you are. Our Gospel reading reminds us of who we are in Christ and reminds us that even though Father's Day in the world was last week, we who are baptized into Christ, every day is our heavenly Father's Day – another day lived in His grace, in His love, in His forgiveness, in His care. Every day, another day as His sons and daughters in Christ – which may bring struggles, challenges, and division, and will certainly bring failures; but which also will bring great blessing. For your heavenly Father is always blessing. It may not always feel like it or seem like it, but the sword cuts in order to heal. And we thank God for caring so much about us!