

Matthew 10:24-39 | “Those Who Lose Their Life For My Sake Will Find It” June 21, 2020

Jeremiah 20:7-13, Psalm 69:7-18, Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

INTRO

Well, I'll begin with a “Happy Father's Day” to all of the dads out there who might be listening. I always laugh at the stereotype that on Mother's Day we might go to church & hear sermons about how wonderful it is to have good mothers, & on Father's Day we hear messages about how to be a better Father... The subtext being that dads are typically deadbeats, like Homer Simpson or Archie Bunker. But maybe that's a reputation that we dads have earned more than we'd like to admit. Well, regardless of who your dad is or was, we have a heavenly Father infinitely patient & kind & who swells with love & compassion for us — and we can be grateful for that!

We're in the season of Pentecost in the church — it's a long season that takes up about half of the year. Half of the church year is filled with commemorations of events in Jesus' life & ministry, like Advent & Christmas, Lent & Easter. But the other half of the year we switch our focus to the life of the church — and this is the season of Pentecost, or Ordinary Time as some churches call it. And in Pentecost we reflect on what it means to follow Jesus — to be a Christian — what that looks like, & the implications of faith for our daily lives, and today in no exception to this. So as always, I'll invite you to pause this recording and to read the lessons assigned for today if you haven't already done so. They are Jeremiah 20:7-13, Psalm 69:7-18, Romans 6:1b-11, and Matthew 10:24-39.

WORKING WITH DAD

Well, since it is Father's Day I'll start with a “dad story”. I remember that growing up many of my friends had dads who were builders or who worked with their hands. A lot of them actually I had no idea what they really did, but they drove trucks & fixed things, or built things, & my friends would learn these skills from their fathers. Now my dad was handy enough in his own right, but he didn't drive a tractor or have a collection of pipe wrenches or open up those green utility boxes on the street corner for a living — he was a pastor. And so one day — feeling like I

was missing out on something and wanting to be a little more like my friends who were learning skills from their dads — I suggested to my dad that I should go to work with him & *work*.

I knew that my dad did funerals & went to the city Remembrance Day wreath laying every year. I knew that he met with people to talk about their faith & to pray with them, he wrote sermons & went to meetings. But it didn't occur to me that none of this would be very fun, or exciting as a kid — I just thought that I could go to his office with him & staple something maybe, or use the hole-punch — develop some *skills!* (My own boys are clearly a bit quicker on the uptake than me — they've certainly never offered to come to the office & help me at work...) It was things like this that made me think, "Boy, if we weren't such a church family maybe we would be a little more normal & I could have a normal life..."

OPPOSITION & WEARINESS

Now, I'm not suggesting in any way that I suffered for my faith in any deep way growing up, but I did wonder sometimes what I was missing out on. Why did I have to spend every Sunday in church when my friends were skiing in the mountains? Faith was important to me, but I felt sometimes like I had to give up so much to be a Christian.

Well, the trials of 8-year-old Jonny are a bit of a farce compared to others, no doubt. But we all have our moments in which we've really suffered loss of one kind or another for our faith — significant loss even. Many of us have been ostracized by others — by coworkers, neighbours, or even family — for faith in Jesus. And it hurts. It hurts even more because not wanting to give up on God or walk away from faith, we might resign ourselves to the fact that these hardships are likely not going to go away. Over time it might lead us to just keep our mouths shut, to stop mentioning our faith, or to simply try to fit in with the people around us — adopting a kind of "quietism".

Both Jeremiah and the author of today's Psalm experienced this in very significant ways.

Jeremiah says that he couldn't keep himself from speaking God's word, and as a result those around him sought his destruction:

*“If I say, ‘I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name’,
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.*

For I hear many whispering.

Terror is on every side!

‘Denounce him! Let us denounce him!’

say all my close friends,

watching for my fall.” —Jeremiah 20:9-10

The psalm today echoes this experience:

*“For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach,
that dishonour has covered my face.*

*I have become a stranger to my brothers,
an alien to my mother’s sons.*

For zeal for your house has consumed me,

and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.” —Psalm 69:7-9

As we read these passages, we get a sense of both Jeremiah’s and the Psalmist’s defeat — how could they be going through such hardship for being faithful to God? When we go through similar experiences, we might complain to God too — “I thought this would be easier! If you are the God of the Universe, why don’t you throw a guy a bone once in a while?!?”

NOT AN EASY FAITH TO FOLLOW

I remember seeing a meme online a few years ago of a classical painting of the early Christians martyrs in Rome. It’s a painting of the Christians being tied up to torches to be lit on fire by Emperor Nero’s court. And over the painting the image had imposed a fake twitter feed of a prominent Health & Wealth gospel preacher (who will remain nameless) with quotes from

their books & sermons, as though this modern preacher were giving advice to the Christian martyrs. It was all quotes about how we simply need to have more faith, begin each day with positive thoughts about our potential, and speak into the success & blessing that God is going to give us in life — all complete garbage, really.

The irony of course is that the early church — that suffered so dearly for their faith — would never have endorsed or believed any of these empty platitudes. The early church knew that the life of following Jesus would be profoundly costly. If our faith is just a way to help us feel better about ourselves & live a happier life, then it's simply another form of self-help.

Jesus is revered around the world for his teaching on loving others, of equality, of the inclusion of outsiders, but people are often ignorant of some of Jesus' more difficult teachings. He says that no servant is above their master, and that if people reject & persecute him, then we should expect the same thing for ourselves. The life of following him is not going to be an easy one.

And then he says something even more disturbing & difficult — he says that he hasn't actually come to bring peace, but a sword — that he is a dividing line that is drawn through all of our priorities & loves. And then he cuts to the heart of one of the strongest social bonds of the ancient world — family.

FAMILY & BAPTISM

Family systems were paramount in the Ancient Near East — if you didn't have family, you didn't have a name, a clan, a security net, an inheritance, a reputation, or honour — you were nothing, a dog. Family systems were really important in Jesus' day. And the church did something completely radical — it said that your family networks weren't in fact ultimate things — that there was a more true family, and it wasn't one of blood bonds.

In Jesus, & through faith we are adopted into God's family as his daughters and sons — so that we now have spiritual sisters and brothers, & this is the most true family that we have. This is what happens in baptism, & our baptismal liturgy emphasizes this when it says,

“We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ. As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.” —LBW, 121.

Think about that — do you believe this? That in faith, we are adopted into God’s family & that this spiritual family is even more important than our earthly ones? Baptism is very, very important for Christians. Paul says, in our NT lesson:

“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” — Romans 6:4

Baptism is a transfer from death to life — it’s joining Jesus in his death & letting his death cover us so that we will be raised to new life just as he was resurrected. Baptism is a matter of salvation, and if you haven’t been baptized, I urge you to consider it.

One of the reasons foster parenting, or adoption is so beautiful is that it reflects the reality of our being chosen by God & welcomed into his family regardless of what our past is. In natural parenting, parents don’t get to choose their children (though they still love them, no doubt), but adoption & fostering mirrors the fact that God sees us & has chosen to adopt us into his family, knowing full well who we already are & where we’ve come from.

GIVING IT ALL

What Jesus is emphasizing in our Gospel lesson is that following him means letting go of everything else — even things like family when they won’t follow you in faith. This doesn’t mean that we cut ties with our families or friends, not at all. But if we have been baptized, & our old life has been put to death with Jesus, then we are welcomed into God’s family — a more eternal reality than even our earthly families.

Jesus wants all of us surrendered to him, not simply pieces of the pie, and that includes our earthly relationships. C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*,

“Christ says, ‘Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don’t want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit.’” —C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, 169.

GOSPEL

Three times in this lesson Jesus says to us, “Fear not.” Fear not, when we suffer for our faith — if God cares about the sparrows he cares a whole lot about you, he has the hairs of your head numbered. Jesus suffered alienation, shame, & persecution on our behalf!

Don’t hang on to God with one hand, & other things with the other hand. Ask God to help you let go of the things you hold onto alongside of faith — whether it be family, ambition, reputation, habits, or something else entirely. Because you can’t have both — you either have Jesus, or you have what you’re hanging onto — and we’re not missing out when we cling to Jesus.

We might experience division with those who we love and yet who don’t believe, but Jesus knows this too. He underwent separation from his Heavenly Father in order to die on the cross for us, so that our sinful selves might be crucified too and raised with him to new life, so that we might be given the gift of a new spiritual family — the people of God — the church!

So it doesn’t matter if you have or had a good father or bad father in this life, we’ve got a Heavenly Father now, and he’s *good*. He loves us unconditionally, he forgives us when we make mistakes, he delights to see us grow, & he releases us into his good, good world to live as his image bearers, reflecting him & bearing witness to the good news of his love & grace for all. Amen.