

Proper 07 A 2017
June 25, 2017 :: Matthew 10: 25-39
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“The Grace and Peace of God.”

In today’s gospel, we learn about the cost to us of being a follower of Jesus. And what’s the bottom line? Just this: it’s not necessarily an easy life.

In the worst-case scenario — and especially for a first century follower of Jesus — it was actually possible for a person to be betrayed by family or friends, to be handed over to government officials for investigation, and, if found guilty, to be flogged, or put to death.

All of which begs the question: Who would seriously choose that as a possible life option? And who would want to hear a Sunday sermon that talks about such things, even as a remote possibility?

However, it is possible that Jesus was being a bit hyperbolic, and now that he has our attention, he can tell us what we really need to hear. And that’s what he does.

First of all, Jesus tells us that we should not fear death, because even though the “powers that be” have the ability to kill the human body, they cannot touch the human soul.

And then, Jesus follows that with some beautiful, poetic imagery: that of the sparrow, worth only half a penny, which is nevertheless cared for and loved by God. And God loves every one of us as well.

And so, in what turns out to be a bizarrely contrasting narrative, Jesus has laid out two fundamental principles of Christianity: First, we are not spared from suffering. And, second, when we do suffer, God suffers along with us. Let’s examine those two basic tenets of the Christian life, shall we?

First, suffering: we may not be flogged before governors or hated by everyone, but we do struggle, right? We contract diseases. We grieve the death of loved ones. We lose jobs. And we undergo any number of nasty experiences — some trivial, and some catastrophic. And part of what Jesus seems to be saying in this passage, is that we will most probably *continue* to suffer to some degree or extent.

In other words, being a follower of Jesus is not going to fix the challenges of this mortal life. If it were, everything would just be lovely. But it's not.

That's why we can read about the mass murder of Coptic Christian children in Egypt. That's why we hear about bombings in Manchester, England. That's why there are killings in Paris, Ferguson, Orlando, Boston, Charleston, or Newtown.

And even though the Old Testament prophets, as well as the New Testament evangelists, would have us hold on to the hope of a time when the exact opposite would be true — let's face it — that time ain't now.

So how are we to live in *this* world, where hate and violence are so rampant?

We need the help of God.

And that takes us to Jesus' second fundamental principle of Christianity: Our God is with us. We are not alone in our struggles. God is also here. To comfort us. To help us through the

difficult times. To show us the way when we don't know where to turn. To help us when we cannot help ourselves. And, certainly, to rejoice with us in good times.

So, to summarize the two basic principles of the Christian life: We will sometimes struggle and suffer in this life, but God is with us nevertheless.

Our challenge is to keep these two principles in mind when we think about any or all of the current controversies that we seem to be enmeshed in — whether in the church, or in our nation, or maybe even in our families and communities.

So often, the voices on both sides of a particular issue want resolution — they want a solution — and they may seek to do this by legislative action, by human edict, and having one winner; all based on contradictory interpretations of the same text or principle. So, what are we to do?

Perhaps we should consider the possibility that Jesus is not necessarily providing us with a pathway *out* of our struggle and

suffering, but rather a means by which we can maintain our Christian identity and integrity while still in the midst of it.

And could it be that, once we've accepted our situation for what it is, *that only then* can the Holy Spirit could show us the way forward?

That's how Jesus seems to imagine things going. But at the same time, we still need to remain open to hearing and respecting opposing points of view, while not always assuming that our point of view is necessarily the right point of view, or the only point of view.

In other words, in our struggles and conflicts, we are not always called by God into a winner-take-all contest. But rather to be the people who proclaim to everyone else that, regardless of where you're standing in that struggle or conflict, God is with you and me. God is *with* all of us, and *for* all of us. And then, to share with everyone else, the love we have known in Christ.

So, what helps to keep us on this particular pathway? Several things:

First, in all things, and in all places, we listen for the still, small voice of God.

The God who was with the infant Isaac, who grew into a great patriarch for God's chosen people.

The God who keeps watch over our lives, as the Psalmist tells us.

The God who will reunite us all in a resurrection like his, as we read in the letter to the Romans.

And the God who came to earth to proclaim that love is stronger than death.

And then, what we hear whispered, we must proclaim from the housetops:

that Jesus has been raised from the dead,

and that the kingdom of God has come very
near us.

In this life, we are not spared from suffering and conflict. But when we do suffer, when we are in conflict, God is right there with us. Suffering with us. And enabling us, not only to bear up under our own burdens, but also, and I think especially, to be able to bear one another's burdens.

And it is then, when through the actions and ministrations of the people around, when we will most profoundly experience the grace and peace of God.

Amen.