

Two Truths for Our Time

Sometimes when I listen to the current newscasts I hear those folks talking about the uniqueness of this time; how different this time is and how different the response to some long standing issues are, yet as I think back I remember other times of conflict and turmoil when the issues raised seem similar, times when the demonstrations have led to violence, when cries for justice have seemed to be answered but then as time has passed it seems those cries have faded and been ignored and little has changed. I also remember hearing folks talk about how some things never seem to change when speaking about the ways of people in general. Those were some of the thoughts and images in my mind, as I turned to trying to prepare for this week's worship service when revisiting the lectionary passages suggested for this Sunday. As a pastor who follows the lectionary, this is the third time I have visited this section of the gospel of Matthew and the associated readings for this Sunday as a pastor. It sometimes amazes me just how apt these ancient texts are for today's world; although perhaps it shouldn't, because the wisdom of that old folks saying about things not changing may be referring to basic human nature. The readings which form the selections for this week are not ones well liked by most preachers called to stand before their congregation and bring a message. This is especially true of those who prefer to preach strictly from the gospel text, because one of our most beloved images of Christ is that of the Prince of Peace. It is hard to find that message in this passage. In fact, three years ago when this group of texts appeared, Jill Duffield, editor of the Presbyterian Magazine Outlook began her weekly commentary on them with this heading: "I do not like biblical door number one or biblical door number two this week." And those are the two texts which I read this morning. You have to admit that this description of the family life of Abraham and Sarah from Genesis does not present a flattering picture of their treatment of Hagar and Ishmael. For this reason these texts require us to examine them closely to find what message lies within them that our initial discomfort might lead us to miss. At this point in Matthew's narration of Jesus' ministry, the disciples are all present. They have become familiar with his teachings; they know what the reign of God should look like and the message that they are to proclaim about it. We too are familiar with these teachings. We know that if those teachings were actually the lived reality of the world, then God's reign would indeed be here on earth as it is in heaven as so often pray. There would indeed be peace on earth. So we need to consider what teaching is Jesus giving his disciples here? Perhaps this teaching is not about the kingdom of God but about the world around them which they will be sent into to proclaim what he has taught. So I think that there are two ways we need to hear what is said...two truths in the words that Jesus spoke to those first disciples that also have important meaning for us. Jesus tried not only to prepare his disciples by teaching them about the reign of God, but about discipleship and the cost they would face as they proclaimed the kingdom values. Just as they did not understand the role of the Messiah at this point, they did not understand the cost of discipleship. In this text, Jesus gives them preparation for their future role as disciples with two basic truths which are also here as guidance for us. First, division and discord are an inescapable part of our life in this world. There are brief periods of time when this may seem further away from our personal lives or not quite as disruptive to them, but this is not one of those times. Every headline or news caption seems to blare this reality so that it cannot be ignored. Every family and every person has experienced some pain or disruption from recent

events from minor to major. And the communications networks of our times make the images vivid. So this isn't news to any of us. Much of this discord could have been prevented, some of it should have been unnecessary. That's the tragedy, but it is also the truth of our condition. And we should commit ourselves to the healing of that division and discord—where possible. But in this passage, we are faced with the truth that that healing of discord is not always possible. Some of the discord in our world is unavoidable and a result of living with integrity, of sharing the truth of the Gospel, and of bearing witness to the grace of God we have encountered in Christ. This is also a tragedy...that people should suffer for bearing witness to Jesus and the teachings about what the reign of God should look like. In verses 34-36 Jesus says: "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 a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foe's will be members of one's own household." What do we do with this statement from Jesus about bringing conflict? In many ways, this is a central element of the passage. One temptation, and one often followed, is to simply ignore it or see it as Jesus' encouragement to disciples who were in these situational differences for whatever particular cause or stance that seems most important at the moment. Just now, I think our culture has enough division and discord. I also think that there are enough people who have decided that those who disagree with them fit into this category that we need to be careful about the temptation, and that is a deliberate use of the word, to use these words for that purpose. It is very easy for us to decide that we are the truth teller or the standard bearer for justice and to stop listening to those who feel or believe differently. This has become the so much the norm for much of our society. It has resulted in the labeling of those who feel or believe differently as untruthful and unjust, as the enemy, as one whose voice can be ignored. In this time of so much turmoil, it then becomes a real challenge on how to voice a call about justice unless one roots it firmly in the teachings of the one who tried to prepare those disciples he was sending out to face a world where division and discord would meet them. Especially since the tool that he was giving them was a commandment to love others...even those who were their enemies. And we know how well that worked for him. I think that is often what is misunderstood about the last verses of this passage. "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 up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." The issue for Jesus is whether or not his followers... his disciples love him enough to truly follow him...to proclaim his teachings and to live according to them...to put love of him and others before everything else...that is the cross he is challenging them and us to pick up. A quote which is circulating on Facebook now from a young African American author and speaker, Austin Channing Brown puts it this way: "I believe firmly that to practice love is to disrupt the status quo which is masquerading as peace." These days we don't often think of love as being a risking endeavor, yet it can easily become that if you show your love by speaking it loudly and strongly in the public forum where hate is being proclaimed. If we faithfully proclaim the good news of the gospel of God's love for all—with the understanding that all truly means ALL—then we are going against the status quo of our divisive and barrier laden society which separates us by race, status and so many things, which creates all manner of injustices which we become blind to and complacent about. So the words of Jesus to his disciples and to us was a warning, a preparation that faithful discipleship would

not be easy—it would be like picking up a cross. That is the first word of this passage. The second word Jesus offers is more straightforward. It is a much easier word to hear and to proclaim. It is that amid this discord—whether it is necessary or not—whether it is self-inflicted, as is often the case—or not--the second truth found here is the Jesus is with us. Still. Jesus was with them to give this assurance. To tell them how valuable they were. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” That phrase: “Do not be afraid.” is the hallmark of the gospel message. Fear is really the antithesis of faith, yet fear is often the strongest emotion which governs our daily lives and obscures the true peace and comfort that God’s presence with us provides. In the very ugly passage from Genesis where the jealousy of Sarah is shown—where Abraham does not stand up to protect the life of either Hagar or his son Ishmael---where Hagar gives in to such despair and grief that she weeps thinking they will die---even here is a message of grace. Because in that wilderness her wanderings have led her to Beer-sheba, the place of seven springs, her despair and fear have blinded her but when she cries out to God, God opens her eyes and then she sees the well of water. Our lives are often like that as well. Fear blinds us to what we need to do, but we have the assurance from our Lord of how valuable we are. That does not mean that discipleship is easy. Christ’s example proves that is not. But as Rob Bell a modern day writer of books on theology popularized this phrase: Love wins—Christ’s example also proved that to be true as well. In the name the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.