

**SERMON**  
**Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 12**  
**June 22, 2008**

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

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A husband and wife were walking out of church one Sunday morning, when the wife said to her husband; “John, did you see that strange hat Mrs. Woodworth was wearing in Church today?” Without hesitation John said; “No honey, I did not,” as he continued to walk to the car.

Frustrated at her husband’s lack of response she then said to him; “Well, did you notice that Mr. Smith is starting to go bald? “No, I did not,” replied John as he opened the car door for her to get inside.

“Well, I’m sure that you saw that Mrs. Thompson was not wearing her wedding ring this morning.” Again, John said, “No dear, I did not notice!” She then said, “You know John, sometimes I wonder if you get anything at all out of going to Church.”

I would say that the moral of this story is that, “sometimes people get different things out of going to Church, depending upon what they expect to receive when they get there.”

I would guess that it is the same with many of you here this morning. Sometimes you might go away shocked at what was said, either by me or perhaps by someone else in the congregation.

But there are also times when we are even shocked by what Jesus said. Today’s Gospel story is one of those times. Listen to these words of Jesus recorded in Matthew’s Gospel: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

A few weeks ago, I attended a homiletics convention in Minneapolis. One of the presenters was Anna Carter Florence. She is an amazing preacher and an accomplished theologian. I would like to share with you her reflections regarding these words of Jesus. She writes:

“This is a hard passage to read when your country is at war. After five years of crying, Peace! Peace! when there is no peace, Jesus’ words sound as hollow and empty as the room of a soldier who is never coming home.

But the sword Jesus came to bring was never the sword of kings and rulers, as his disciples – then and now – eventually learn. The sword Jesus came to bring is one that pierces Mary’s heart and Jesus’ own side. It slices through falsehood and serves up righteousness. It exposes evil and flashes truth. It takes the shape of a cross and leaves scars for us to touch.

It always takes disciples a long time to get this. Their instinct – our instinct – is to reach for the sword, whenever trouble threatens. But Jesus will not let them. Even in the garden, on the night of his arrest, he will not let them.

For Jesus, a sword is never as straightforward as a weapon. It is something sharper and deadlier: it is the line that divides us from the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God, which is at hand. Or maybe it is the line that divides us from longing and belonging.”

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Then Jesus goes on to say, “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 will be members of one’s own household.”

Now I don’t know about you, but to me these words of Jesus are rather shocking. They appear to be totally out of character for him. After all, we know and love Jesus as the Prince of Peace, and as the one who greets his disciples, “Peace be with you.”

We know Jesus as one that teaches us to love our neighbor and even our enemies, not to mention our own families. So did Jesus change his mind?

Not really. For if you notice, Jesus does not call his disciples to create conflict in our relationships. Rather, He tells His followers that these are the consequences of discipleship. And there is no question as to whether or not this will happen. It is inevitable.

“Pretty soon,” says Jesus, “I’ll send you out to do the same work I’ve been doing, and it won’t be easy for you. At times you will feel like helpless sheep among starving wolves. Many will turn a deaf ear to your message. Doors will slam in your faces. If you visit a synagogue to share your message, they will drag you into the streets and flog you.

If you preach in the streets, the police will arrest you and haul you into court. After a while the persecution will have you running like a rabbit from one town to the next. Eventually the hatred against you will grow so bitter that your own brother or your own daughter will look for a chance to turn you in.

After all, a disciple is no better than the master. Therefore, if they mistreat me and accuse me of working for the devil, they will certainly do the same to my followers.”

At this point, I would like to be honest with you. I really struggle with this. As a white, middle-class, American, male, I can’t honestly say that I have experienced any of these things that Jesus is talking about. I wonder if I am indeed making Jesus out to be a liar.

After all, I claim to be a disciple, but what Jesus says will happen to his disciples has never happened to me. Please do not get me wrong, I don’t believe that this has anything to do with God’s love for me, or God’s intent on being my source of salvation. But, I sometimes wonder if I am truly living a life that reflects discipleship.

And I would challenge all of you to consider a similar question. If, indeed we have no fear of publicly proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, there can only be two reasons.

Either, we are proclaiming a false Christ that is so intertwined with our culture, that He is no longer a threat to the powers and principalities of this world. Or, indeed we are afraid of what will happen if we really take Jesus seriously for who he was and what he taught.

But before Jesus tells his followers the consequences of discipleship, he tells them not to be afraid. “Do not be afraid.” Three times Jesus says to them, “have no fear.”

A mother was tucking her five-year-old daughter into bed one night while an earth-shaking thunderstorm was going on outside. The little girl said, “Mommy, will you please sleep with me tonight? I’m scared of the thunder and lightning.” The mother kindly but firmly refused the little girl’s request. “But why won’t you sleep with me?” the girl asked with tears welling up in her eyes.

“Because Daddy wants me to sleep with him,” the mother explained. The little girl shook her head in disgust and muttered, “That big chicken!”

So why shouldn't we be afraid? According to Jesus, being His disciple is full of danger and uncertainties. But then he describes how much God loves us and cares for us. He gives us an example of how God values sparrows. Now I don't know about you, but sparrows were never seen as objects of God's love in my house growing up.

My dad enjoys bird watching. He used to have multiple birdhouses in our back yard. They were intended to attract the "pretty birds" like robins, martins, cardinals, yellow finches, bluebirds, etc. But it seemed that all we got was sparrows.

My dad would say things like; "Gee-wiz, the gosh-darn sparrows have chased all of the martins out of my martin house." Those weren't his exact words, but I think you can sense his frustration.

I kind of felt sorry for the poor sparrows. How come no one liked them? It wasn't their fault that they were born to be sparrows.

Actually it was God's fault that they were born to be sparrows. And God decided to make a whole bunch of them. So many in fact, that if one dies, there are millions more to take it's place.

But that's not God's way of thinking. God created them, and God loves them. For Jesus went on to say that not one of them will fall to the ground without the Father in heaven knowing about it. That's pretty remarkable. But also notice that God does not prevent sparrows from falling to the ground and dying.

All of God's creatures, including sparrows will someday die. The point that Jesus is making is that suffering and death are part of the life experience on earth. But our Father in heaven is there with us and assures us that the final chapter has not yet been written. For death will not win the day.

Jesus also uses the example that God knows the number of hairs we have on our head. I know that for some of us guys, that is not too difficult. But can you imagine that, given the fact of how much hair is lost each day in our combs and brushes. No one stops to count them. Yet every one of them has a number in the mind of God.

The point is obvious. And it has nothing to do with how many days until we die. The point is that if God takes notice of all these little things, how much more does he take notice of all that is happening with us? How much more does God care about our well-being? So Jesus says; "Do not be afraid."

And again, he says this as he sends the disciples out into the world. Before they go, he warns them of the consequences they will suffer. He tells them what will happen to them if they continue to be his disciples.

He talks about the absence of peace. He talks about families being divided. He even talks about losing one's life. And as I said, that doesn't seem to give us much comfort at all, does it?

But it does lead us to faith. Because what is our alternative – to continue to live in fear? For it is God alone, who is to be feared. But not to be feared because of eternal judgment and damnation. But rather, God is to be feared because of His awesome power to love. For we all know that to be loved unconditionally can really be scary.

And it is this God who also cares for the lowly sparrow and the number of hairs on our head. Nothing in this world is outside of God's concern. No creature is insignificant to him.

If he lets sparrows and disciples die, it is not because they are worthless. You see, physical death is not an evil in itself. It is only a pathway to a new and better life for those who are in Christ.

These are the words that the disciples needed to hear. These are the words that gave them courage and hope in spite of their fears. These are the words that we need to hear as we are sent forth into the world.

For we know who will rule in the end. The victory has already been secured on the cross and guaranteed with an empty grave. We know that the word that is whispered out of fear in many places today will triumph.

We know that it will be proclaimed in confidence from the rooftops. We know that it is the one true hope and life-giving message we have been called to share. We know that this message might lead to divisions or even death.

But we also know that the gates of Hell will not prevail against us. Where Jesus leads the way, we cannot fail. Our devotion, our focus, our mission must always be on serving Jesus Christ in the world.

For then we become who we must be; disciples of the risen Lord; a community of believers proclaiming the love of God to the world, to our neighbors, to our brothers and sisters, to our mothers and our daughters-in-law.

And in doing so, we shall not fear. Rather, by the grace of God, we will prevail. For our equality is not measured by human standards, but by God's never ending love for each and every one of us. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.