

Well, before I read the Gospel passage for this morning, I would like to take a poll. I asked this question through the Wednesday devotional and a few of you responded. So, here is the question: Do you have a list of scriptures you wish were not in the biblical text? If so, raise your hand! I certainly have more than one, but today's passage is one that causes all of us to wonder why it made the cut. I appreciated commentator Jill Duffield who titled her article about this particular text, "I do not like biblical door number one or biblical door number two this week!" The choices laid out in the passage are not easy to swallow!

So, it's best to give this passage some context, before we hear it read. This particular passage is part of what is known as the "Missionary Discourse," which begins with Jesus summoning his twelve disciples. Once summoned, Jesus gives his disciples instructions and authority, as he prepares for them to be sent out. Emilie Townes reminds us that this passage is about discipleship. She also stresses that we need to keep in mind that the word "disciple" means "learner."

Throughout this missionary discourse, Jesus is prepping the disciples for what they will face as they are sent out, for he said earlier in this chapter, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves." Jesus knows the disciples will face rejection. Yet, you have to love Jesus' encouragement, for he continues instructing them saying, "Do not fear!" Do not fear the wolves that can only harm your body, but not your soul! Do not fear the rejection you will probably experience! Do not fear, just trust that the Spirit will give you the words, strength and courage you need to tell others that the kingdom of God has come near.

This morning, we may very well feel like sheep in the midst of wolves given our current American culture where everything seems to be up for grabs. Rejection is a real possibility as we share our faith with others. With this in mind, here are a couple of questions I want us to keep in mind as we wrestle with God's Word for us today: What could Jesus possibly be teaching his disciples with a passage that many of us would rather not have in Scripture? And what could Jesus be teaching us at this juncture in our world's history?

Listen now to the Living Word of God for us this morning from the Gospel of Matthew 10:24-39:

"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! "So, have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 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. "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. "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 foes will be members of one's own household. 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. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

The Message - Radical Choices

Connie is a faithful Christian woman who, in retirement, has become a daily attender of Catholic mass; and she needs no lectionary commentary to know that she does not like this particular passage! Connie insists that Jesus has just gone too far, for she knows that Jesus comes to bring peace, not a sword. She's no Pollyanna though, for she has been around the church long enough to know that discord happens within the community of faith, but Jesus she concludes would never have encouraged such division. I can see Connie shaking her head and wondering out loud, "How did this ever get into the Bible?"

Yes, how *did* this ever get into the Bible? It made its way into the text, because Jesus didn't want his disciples to be surprised by what they would face as they shared the message that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus wanted their eyes to be wide open, as they were prepared to be sent out. Jesus knew that the message they were to carry and enact would upset the powers and principalities of both empire and temple.

The message – the kingdom of heaven has come near. Yet, why would this upset the powers and principalities of both empire and temple? Well, here are just a few reasons: It is a kingdom that brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. It is a kingdom that fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. It is a kingdom that cures the sick, raises the dead, cleanses the lepers, casts out demons and confronts the self-righteous. This kingdom proclaims that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. This kingdom challenges followers to pick up their cross and then warns them that in order to find their life, they must lose it!

"Do not think that I came to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," said Jesus.

I can only imagine that some of the disciples might have had second thoughts! Let's play with that idea for a moment. Listen in to a fictitious disciple that is having some second thoughts!

"What a minute. I like this Jesus guy, but this sounds pretty radical. I know that I have witnessed Jesus do some pretty miraculous things like commanding demons to leave, healing the chronically ill, and feeding literally thousands. But, I'm not sure I want to put my life on the line for this guy or cause. I'm not fond of wolves even when I have something to defend myself with and now he wants me to go and take nothing with me, not even a change of clothes! Am I ready to commit to these demands? Am I ready to lose my life as I know it – give up my routine, my comfort, my security, and maybe even some relationships on account of following this guy?" [Pause]

What could Jesus possibly be teaching his disciples? What could Jesus be teaching us, you and me and this church, in our particular time and place in history through his words?

A phrase from Thursday's Sunrise Lectio Divina comes to mind. I believe Jesus is challenging his disciples and all of us to stay in the game, even when things seem incredibly difficult, unbearable or disheartening.

You all have heard that I play softball and I could tell countless stories. But, if you have ever played or even watched sports, haven't you seen teams that quit before the game is over? When the deficit seems too great, players often check out and give up. Figuring they have lost anyways, so why bother. Well, my dad watched me play a lot of softball games over the years and he had a favorite saying about the game. He said, "It's never over until it's over!" He knew this to be true, because over the years I had been in countless games that looked *over*, but my team miraculously rallied, coming back to win.

One particular softball season comes to mind. I was playing in the very league I am playing in later this afternoon. The team I was on was called the Saints, but during the regular season we became known as the "Ain'ts". We had played 6 games and had lost every one of them. This Sunday afternoon league is about grace though, so all teams get a slot in the playoffs. In our first playoff game, we played a team that had beaten us by a large margin. This was supposed to be a breeze for them, given they had beaten us before. Well, the "Ain'ts" became the Saints that day, because we won our first game and gained a slot in the playoff game. The next week we came back for the Championship game, just happy we had one win for the season.

As that game progressed against the season's first place team, things were looking bleak. We were in the field and the other team had loaded the bases and there were no outs. There was one more batter before their biggest hitter came up to bat. Now I mentioned that this softball league was about grace, that's because each team has beginners, intermediates and stars. So, what happened next will more likely make sense! The batter lined to the shortstop (1st out) and then the shortstop tagged the runner heading too quickly for third (2nd out) and then the beginner running towards home didn't realize he needed to return to 3rd base (3rd out). A triple play completely changed the game and the "Ain'ts", no the Saints, won the whole softball season!

Stay in the game... we did that softball season. Stay in the game... Jesus said to the disciples, even when things look very bleak! Stay in the game... Jesus is saying to us, even when things don't make sense, even when we face rejection, even when it looks like the world has loaded the bases and it about to hit a grand slam. Stay in the game!

Yet, to stay in the game we will be faced with some radical choices along the way, choices that may very well feel like a sword has done its work.

Now before I dive further into all of us having to make radical choices in order to stay in the game, I want to make sure we don't read something into this passage that is not there. Jesus is not giving us license to condone discord and Jesus is certainly not suggesting we go around causing discord. Dysfunction in our families or in our communities of faith is not being condoned. This passage is not a blank check for teenagers to write off their parents. It is not a blank check to write off in-laws or a brother you can't stand or that crazy aunt who always makes a scene at family gatherings, or any other relative for that matter. It also is not a blank check to write off those within the church whom you don't understand, or whom you disagree with, or you would not rather not have in your midst. Jesus is not condoning division, he is just

teaching his disciples to be prepared for divisions that may occur because they make the radical choice to stay in the game, sharing and enacting that reality of the kingdom of heaven that has come near.

Remember, “disciple” means “learner.” A disciple is one who continually learns about the ways of God. Discipleship then is about obedience to the ways of God, obedience to the life altering message of God’s vision for all of humanity and creation. Staying in the game, as Christ’s disciples, is about keeping the faith even in the face of opposition. Jesus is basically teaching his disciples not to fall prey to bullies. “Don’t be bullied into backing down or giving up or leaving the game,” says Jesus.

These difficult verses are not the message the disciples are to share with the lost sheep of Israel. These difficult verses just give the disciples a warning as to how difficult the task at hand will be for them.

“Don’t think I’ve come to make life cozy,” said Jesus, according to Eugene Peterson’s translation. Yet, that is exactly what the majority of American Christianity has done. We have made church way too comfortable and downright cozy. American Christianity has catered to the likes and dislikes of its sheep. In *Sojourners*, Stephen Mattson wrote earlier this year, “it appears that the sole purpose of Christianity [in America] is to selfishly protect people’s own self-interests instead of sacrificially serving others.”

The radical choice before us given in the passage today is this: are we going to sacrificially serve others instead of our self-interests? Are we prepared “to be a community of faith, entrusting our self to God alone, to the ways of God as Jesus taught his disciples, even at the risk of losing our life as a church?”

The way forward for us as a church will not be easy, simply because the world in which we move and live and have our being is filled with wolves. Wolves are those who say we can’t possibly make a difference. Wolves are those who say our dreams can’t be done, who warn us to stay safely inside the walls of sanctuaries and all will be fine, or who say to us that we are irrelevant.

The psalmist knew first hand, what Jesus was preparing his disciples for, for he penned, “It is for your sake, O God, that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face... It is zeal for your house, O God, that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

Jesus knew that the disciples would face opposition. Jesus knew that the disciples would have to make some radical choices in order to stay in the game. What radical choices are you willing to make? What radical choices are we willing to make as a church?

“Christians were never meant to be normal,” writes Jacques Ellul, “[for] we do not accept the world as it is, but we insist on the world becoming the way the God wants it to be.” A place where the sick are cured, the dead are raised, the demons are cast out, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the imprisoned are visited, and the strangers are welcomed.

What radical choices will we make to stay in the game as Christ’s disciples, no matter how difficult the way forward might be?

My friends, unless we forget about selves as Jesus said, both individually and as a community of faith, and look only to Jesus we will simply just be cozy Christians. And this I can say with confidence, being cozy Christians is not our call!

Let's not be normal! Let's stay in the game by making radical choices to bring the kingdom of heaven on earth today! Amen!