

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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June 25, 2017
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 10:24-39

Fearless Witness

There was a time not too far in the past when the sources of news and current events were fairly limited. For local and regional news, the sources were the daily newspaper delivered to your front door every morning (or in some cases every evening), as well as the local AM radio station. And if your town was big enough, there might even be a local TV station as well. So with regard to local and regional news, everyone who was paying attention was pretty much getting the same reporting.

In the case of national news, the sources in addition to the local news sources included national broadcast news by the major television and radio networks. Furthermore there were a number of competing weekly news magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek* and *US News and World Report*. Remember those? While there were other sources of print media with varying perspectives on a monthly or bi-monthly basis, for the most part for those who sought to stay abreast of national news, most were getting their news from the same or similar sources.

Keeping up with news from around the world was a bit more challenging. The major news networks and wire services covered the news in places that had direct ties with the US in the business and political realms—places like Europe, the Middle East and East Asia. News from other places, particularly in the global south was harder to come by, and often was not as fresh and up to date when it did make it to our eyes and ears. The exceptions, of course, included war zones and places of natural disasters. I can remember from my young adult years that it was particularly hard to get current news of what was happening in Africa. And while the *New York Times* was a particularly good source of global news, it was easier said than done to get a copy of a current issue if you lived anywhere but the northeast. It was a big deal when the Sunday issue of the Times would make it to a local newsstand. Again, though, our community awareness and knowledge of global news did not vary widely for those paying attention.

There was a time in some of our lives when Americans paying attention were bound together around the daily evening news at 6 and 10.

That was then and this is now—and boy have things changed. While the rise of cable TV news and the Internet itself was the beginning of more news sources with more up to date content and with a particular perspective, what has really changed our awareness of current events and realities is the social media sources that come to us via the Internet.

No longer are we bound together by a common source of news. No longer are we even hearing reporting of the same news events. While there are still daily newspapers and other periodicals as well as radio and television broadcast news, the audiences for these traditional sources is dwindling—especially among the younger generations.

What is particularly notable is that while the internet has made more news available more of the time, from more sources, the audiences for various news outlets varies dramatically. Take Facebook for example. The way it's typically set up, the news that shows up on a person's Facebook feed is tailored to that person. While a user can subscribe to various news outlets, the way in which a person interacts with those sources results in news stories and news outlets that correspond more closely to his or her perspective. The result is that one will see numerous items that resonate with the person reading them. What this can mean is that there is less content that provides a balance of competing

perspectives. Basically, the news one sees tends to reinforce the beliefs and perspective of the person reading it. No longer are we bound by a common narrative of what is happening in the world around us.

We have a tendency to hear the things we like to hear, and avoid the things we'd rather not hear or the things that don't correspond to or resonate with our perspective. We do this with the news and we do this in other parts of our lives as well—like the particular church we attend or the theological perspective that we espouse. It's just a natural part of who we are.

We can be tempted to use this selectivity when it comes to the Bible as well if we're not careful. Depending on one's viewpoint, certain parts of the Bible resonate with some and don't with others.

That certainly can be said for the parts of Jesus' teaching that we read from Matthew's gospel this morning. After hearing it, we may want to set it aside and focus on other parts of the gospel that are more comfortable, more palatable, less challenging.

But unlike the selective news feeds with which we are accustomed in our world today, we cannot pick and choose the parts of Jesus' message that only reinforce and validate our own particular viewpoint.

When 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." (Mt. 10:34) we are perplexed.

Say again. This just doesn't sound right. Isn't Jesus the Prince of Peace? Isn't Jesus the one who reconciles us to God and to one another? Don't we more often think of Jesus being a peacemaker rather than a sword bearer? The answer to these questions is a resounding yes. He is the prince of peace. He is the reconciler. He is a peacemaker.

But he is so much more than those things. Much, much more.

This section in which these perplexing words are recorded is part of a series of teachings about what it means for the disciples to be in mission in the wider world. Bible scholars label this section as the "mission discourse" in which Jesus is preparing his disciples for what lies ahead. Travel lightly, expect opposition, take courage and faithfulness with you in order to be a fearless witness.

In other words, Jesus is saying to his disciples that the world in which you will be ministering in my name is a world that is in many ways at odds with the values and principles of the kingdom of God. Jesus is saying that the message that I am bringing may not resonate with the world's priorities and values. It is not for me to make peace with that. Rather it is for me to stir it up and challenge it, even if it means taking up a sword to make the point and bring about needed change.

Then to drive the point of just how fundamental this challenge can be, he says, "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." (Mt. 10:35-36) Can it be more dramatic than that? Jesus is making it abundantly clear that loyalty to Jesus and to God's kingdom is second to none. Nothing is on par with that ultimate loyalty to God.

Does that mean that we turn our backs on our families? Does Jesus mean to drive a wedge between family members?

He goes on to answer those very questions when he says, "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. . . ." (Mt. 10:37)

Our love for our family members is secondary to our love for Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate focus of our love and devotion. All other love and devotion that we offer to others is subsidiary or secondary. And as long as that love for family does not obscure our love for Jesus or obliterate it, that family love is a beautiful and sacred expression of God's love.

In Jesus' words here he is attempting to get our attention and shake us up. And he surely succeeds.

In our day when we are pulled in many different directions with lots and lots of varying priorities and commitments calling for our loyalty, it's easy to get swept up in the whirlwind and in so doing lose our sharp focus as Jesus' disciples today.

To put it as plainly as I can, our acceptance of our call to be a disciple of Jesus today is the ultimate commitment in our lives. It is unlike any other commitment we make in our lives. There is no other commitment of equal magnitude. All the many other commitments we make in our lives are secondary to this ultimate commitment to God.

This fundamental expression is celebrated in the life of the church every time that we ordain and install officers in our church as we will today. Of the 9 vows that are taken and affirmed in this ceremony, the very first one gives expression to this ultimate loyalty. "Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord *of all* and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?"

Another of the ordination vows is one that should reassure anyone who is still uncomfortable about Jesus' call to raise up the sword that may drive a wedge between family members. This vow is "Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?"

Our call to discipleship is not to be taken lightly. It is serious business. It has consequences for our lives in the world today. When it comes to following Jesus, all of us as companion disciples are in this together. It's not for us to pick and choose which parts of Christian discipleship we like, and discard those parts of Christian discipleship we don't like. Rather, it is for us to support and encourage one another along the path of discipleship so that we together might be as faithful as God calls us to be.

For some, the shock value in what we read of Jesus' words today may have obscured some words of comfort that Jesus also included in his equipping and preparing his disciples. "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." (Mt. 10:29-31)

So do not be afraid. Be a fearless witness. Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior. Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.