

## **“Your Life as a Missionary”**

**Matthew 10:26-39**

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**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**

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### **Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

We began today with alleluias. It is summer in Minnesota – that is always worth an alleluia but I do recognize that it doesn't feel so much like an alleluia kind of time. It is a baptismal hymn – so we begin with what we have in common – “We share by water in the saving death. Reborn we share with him an Easter life as living members of the living Christ, Alleluia.” Our funeral liturgy says, “even at the grave we make our song, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.” Even in times like these, there is a deep joy within the Christian faith because of the trauma that is at the heart of it. We can face the crucifixion with the knowledge that “A new creation comes to life and grows as Christ's new body takes on flesh and blood the universe restored and whole will sing, Alleluia.” On the other side of things, I find sitting, as acting head of staff, at many more virtual House of Hope tables, means hearing points of departure and disagreement on a daily basis.

Even when we agree, you are such thoughtful, nuanced and expressive people that there are challenges to wording, action, and meaning, as well as concerns for atonement, accountability, prejudice and distress, within that acquiescence. (Sometimes I wonder, could we just say, yes.) To be healthy, we need to be able to say both ‘yes’ and ‘no.’

With a global pandemic, the death of George Floyd and resultant unrest and reforms, change, ambiguity, good, and evil are swirling around us. We are living in a rawness that previously was not part of our daily existence (it has been in the world but not at our doorstep). And it is a rawness which the Bible knows and to which the gospel speaks directly. I have long understood the part about mothers and daughters having disagreements, but I now have new ears to hear Jesus' rather shocking words, “Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.”

Way back, in my retail days, and that's way back, among other things, I managed the luggage department at the downtown Minneapolis Dayton's. There came a time when, in order to train sales associates, the Hartmann luggage company created a video starring the superhero Hartmann and his sidekick Valise. Hartmann and Valise appeared to rescue travelers experiencing the difficulties posed by inferior luggage, explaining that the wheels, hinges, construction, and interior design of Hartmann luggage would solve their problems and ease their way. As they explained each of the “life-saving” designs, the voice of the trainer suggested that we in the stores use the phrase: “Do you like that feature? Perhaps you should buy it.”

I don't know if that phrase really sold more luggage, but, for many reasons it continues to echo in my brain. There is an alert there - as one commentator stated, “The gospel shakes up values, rearranges priorities, and reorients goals,” whereas pre-covid we were able to choose our lives buying into the features we like. Much has been taken out of our control in the last three months.

And here comes Jesus with a sword. Another commentator on this passage from Matthew wrote from the point of view of his mother-in-law Connie, he said she knows that the Christian life “will include times of struggle and even oppression” and that “the community of the faithful must seek to persevere even in times of fear” (164). But, she insists, that in this passage, “Jesus goes too far.” She believes “Jesus would never have encouraged such division in the midst of family.” I'm with Connie on this one God is love. I like that feature. I've bought in.

God as accountant, judge, moral authority ... I like that feature – first of all for those with whom I disagree, and then for you and family, and then for me.

It is difficult to buy into the whole package - God who asks for surrender, who keeps insisting that I put my neighbor's needs ahead of my own, a God who has already designed a kingdom of equality, forgiveness, and grace ... we have been taught since Sunday school that we should want this ... at the same time we were taught we could put off the buy in until death. And then Jesus comes along and says the kingdom is now. And that is the difference between our faith as children and our faith as adults.

Walter Brueggemann has a new book titled *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*. It is co-authored by Peter Block and John McKnight and it is a culmination of work he started decades ago talking about faith in the scarcity of Pharaoh versus the abundance of God. This led Brueggemann to critique of the way we are all socialized into what he calls the script of “technological, therapeutic, consumer militarism.” The alternative to that script is the Bible; The Bible, he says, “is not monolithic, one dimensional or seamless. It is ragged and disjunctive and incoherent. Partly,” he states, “it is ragged and disjunctive and incoherent because it has been crafted over time by many committees. But it is also ragged and disjunctive and incoherent because the key character is illusive and irascible in freedom and in sovereignty and in hiddenness, and I’m embarrassed to say, in violence – a huge problem for us.”

There are many features of life with God that I like – but if there is anything to the story of an accounting of life that results in the separation of the sheep from the goats – and I believe there is, I’ve already bought too much luggage while searching for that perfect bag to tote around all my necessities – to the detriment of my soul as well as underpaid laborers everywhere.

As Brueggemann reminds us, “The ragged, disjunctive, and incoherent quality of the counter-script to which we testify cannot be smoothed or made seamless because when we do that the script gets flattened and domesticated and it becomes a weak echo of the dominant script .... [our common, everyday script that] is all about certitude, privilege, and entitlement [which the Bible is not.] Thus care must be taken to let [the Bible] be what it is, which entails letting God be God’s irascible self.” Do you like that feature? In Bible study and discussions with many of you, I know we struggle with some of God’s actions, with the meaning of some passages.

Our gospel this morning is part of what is known as Matthew’s missionary discourse. It is not an invitation to create a family feud but a reality check on our reactions to events that create differences in thinking and action. As we have entered ordinary time – the time of the green paraments – we will hear stories of Jesus’ life. We listen for them over and over again because we are learning to be his disciples. Disciple means learner or follower so we keep listening to the stories of the alternative script so that his ways will become our ways. We see the ways he healed others, and the way he fed great crowds of strangers as our mission. In amongst the many stories of healing and loving kindness are some unique events that hint at the Jesus of today. He let Lazarus die and wept at the grave. There was a moment in time when Mary sent Jesus’ brothers to find him and bring him home because his behavior was too unpredictable maybe even shameful to them. He parted a crowd and walked away because he knew they wanted to make him a king and he would have none of it. And he made a whip to drive the money changers out of the temple after he overturned their tables. Even though Jesus said, “Peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you,” it is not peace at any price. He also says, “I do not give as the world gives.” In this he captures the desire for us to do the work it takes to recognize God’s kingdom in contrast the empire we’ve built and love so much.

And it all harkens back to Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. After a forty day fast, Satan tries to get Jesus to turn stones to bread and he replies, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Then the devil took him to a high point on the temple and tried to get him to throw himself off so the angels would come and rescue him and Jesus said, “Do not put God to the test.” And finally, they go to a

mountain top where the devil offers Jesus the entire world if he will bow to him. Jesus says, “Away with you ...”; because Jesus knows Satan’s words are a lie. We have no word images in the gospels to make us think Jesus carried a literal sword, but his fierce sense of justice and love cut through lies with his words. The world is Gods – unless we bow to evil.

Thomas Keating says, “The temptation to worship Satan in exchange for the symbols of unlimited power is the last-ditch effort of the false self to achieve its own invulnerability and immortality. ... Service of others and not domination is the path to true happiness.” House of Hope has been a counter-cultural, biblically led presence in the city for more than one hundred years. From Presbyterian Homes to Prior Crossing, we have put our nuanced acquiescence into the service of others.

At its meeting on Tuesday evening, the session voted to put Black Lives Matter signs in our Summit Avenue marquee. We also have a banner on the corner of Avon and Portland at the entrance to the parking lot. We recognize that this is a specific organization but it has also become a landmark statement for our time. We realize that other lives matter – with particular concern for anti-Semitism and the bullying and attacks on Asians and Asian Americans incited by those referring to Covid-19 as the China flu. Knowing all of this, we chose Black Lives Matter because Black lives need our help right now and to say nothing is to side with white supremacists.

House of Hope contributes to the programming within the walls of Ujamaa Place; now we are invited to share in the intent to make the streets safer for the Ujamaa men. Practicing freedom, we are missionaries of Jesus Christ. Wherever we are, each of us—is a reflection of what we have learned by sitting at his feet and practicing his Way. If we can face the crucifixions of our time with the knowledge that though “the Spirit’s power shakes the church of God,” we also then know “A new creation comes to life and grows as Christ’s new body takes on flesh and blood the universe restored and whole will sing, Alleluia.”