Pentecost 3 Proper 7

June 21, 2020

Matthew 10:24-39

Today’s Gospel reading is the sort of text that makes preachers sit back and say, “hmm…maybe I’ll preach on the Jeremiah text this week. How often do I preach on Jeremiah?”

But I’d have been making Jesus’ point if I said, “Oh, this is too hard of a text for me to preach on. I don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable by talking about Jesus saying ‘I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother.’ And I really don’t want to have to get into the part where he says, ‘Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.’”

Just typing those words made me stop for a few minutes to consider preaching on the Psalm.

These are *hard words* from Jesus. We like hearing the easier things he said. Grace and mercy and love, and all the things that God’s doing for us. Most of us would rather hear Jesus say, “love your enemies,” than hear this text.

That’s why we need to sit with it, contemplate what Jesus says. Because the root of our discomfort with this text is fear.

We’re afraid of what it means for us, and we’re afraid of our inability to live up to what he asks of us.

The things Jesus has to say to his followers in Matthew 10 make it clear that, while they would be doing amazing things like curing diseases and casting out demons, their work would not be easy, and it would bring attention upon them. And that wasn’t always a good thing when you lived in the midst of the Roman Empire, where crucifixion was a very public means of demonstrating what happened to people who caused trouble, to people who questioned the status quo.

Jesus’ ministry didn’t make the chief priests and scribes happy, but we forget sometimes that the reason Pilate was willing to allow Jesus to be crucified was that Jesus was making trouble beyond the Temple.

It wasn’t healing people that was a problem. It was the message that went with it. The message that the kingdom of God had come near. The message that we should have *agape* love – active concern for their well-being – for everyone, no matter what their position in society.

Jesus was advocating a life ordered in a way that was at odds with the way the Roman Empire did things. He was speaking up for those who had no voice, insisting upon peace that’s derived from justice, not force. He was rumored to be the Messiah, the king of the Jews. And he was encouraging people to place their loyalty in God over the Emperor.

It was that last one that made him a threat to the Empire. By insisting that God come first in our hearts and minds, Jesus is insisting we worship God, not earthly things or people. That our concern for the well-being of *all* of God’s creation should be the driving force in every decision we make, every word we utter.

It’s not just a big thing to ask that God come first in our hearts; it’s practically impossible for us to do all the time.

So we lean on God’s grace and mercy, but sometimes we lean on them so much that we get comfortable. We’re tempted to overlook the hard words, tempted to tame Jesus’ message, to downplay the still radical message that every person is equally important and equally loved in the eyes of God, and should be treated as such by us.

We rely on the promise of God’s mercy and grace to the point where we forget that Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection aren’t just about us and our salvation.

The cross reminds us that most people who have a lot of power will do whatever they can to keep it, no matter the cost to others. But Jesus’ resurrection reminds us that God has power over death itself, that God will be victorious, that God’s plans for creation will come to fruition.

And when we read about what the world will be like then, we might find ourselves thinking, “Yep, that’ll be great one day. It’s a shame we can’t have more of that today. Look at all the things that need to be fixed. I can’t possibly make a difference.”

When we’re tempted to skip texts like today’s Gospel, we tell ourselves that we can be comfortable with part of what Jesus said, but that it’s OK to skip the parts that are hard. After all, there’s no way Jesus can expect us to get it right all the time, right?

We want our faith to be less difficult, less uncomfortable. Life is hard right now, so we want the cake and ice cream words, not the kale and broccoli words.

But skipping the hard parts denies who Jesus is and what Jesus’ ministry was all about. Which isn’t making us comfortable, but making *all of creation* *whole*.

And maybe it’s during the hard times when we need to be reminded of the hard words, of the work that we’re called into. Maybe now is exactly when we need to hear this call to serve even at the risk of the comfort of our relationships.

If Jesus’ message was all about that which God does for us out of God’s love and mercy, then we aren’t challenged to grow. We’d be able to just keep on doing as we please, trusting that God’s grace would bail us out in the end. If you’re tempted to think that, I’d steer you to today’s text from Romans.

Instead, God’s grace and love are meant to transform our hearts and our lives *now*, so that we join in God’s work of bringing wholeness to all of creation.

It’s in our discomfort that we find an opportunity for growth. It’s in being open to sitting with these uncomfortable words that we are reminded of the dangers of getting too comfortable with how we understand Jesus’ teaching and the ways that it continues to challenge us.

While we have the promise that salvation is a free act of God’s grace, it’s passages like the ones we hear today that remind us that how we respond to that gift matters. The thought that we will one day be called upon to explain ourselves ought to make us deeply uncomfortable.

But rather than allowing that thought to scare us into thinking God is keeping score, these hard words can be the nudge we need to move past our fear, seeking to live our lives in ways that are worthy of God’s infinite love for us, in ways that create conditions that are conducive to God’s grace being made known by all.

May it be so for us.