

June 21/22, 2008
Are You Comfortable Enough?
Matthew 10:24-39
Rev. Susan Bresser

For the summer, Scott & I are preaching from the lectionary. The lectionary is scripture that is already chosen for each worship weekend. I was excited about lectionary preaching because I tend to study the lectionary readings, but why, why, oh why, was I so excited? Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is not exciting ... well; it's exciting because it tends to rile us up. It's not so much exciting for me, as it is very challenging. It leaves us with many questions about who this Jesus really is and what exactly does Jesus want from us.

It's about discipleship ... and it's about the kind of discipleship we often don't want to hear about or maybe we just don't think it really applies to us.

Remember the movie *Karate Kid*? Mr. Miagi is to teach karate to Daniel, a teenager with lots of angst. Miagi agrees on one condition: that Daniel must submit totally to his instruction and never question his methods. Daniel shows up at Mr. Miagi's eager to learn. To his disappointment, Mr. Miagi has him paint a fence. Miagi demonstrates the precise motion for the job: up and down, up and down. It takes days for Daniel to finish the job. Next, Miagi has him scrub the deck using a specific stroke. Again the job takes days. Daniel's not very happy. Next, Miagi tells Daniel to wash and wax his cars and again, shows Daniel how to do it. [wax on, wax off] Finally, Daniel has had enough. "I thought you were going to teach me karate, but all I've done are the chores you don't want to do!" Ah, Daniel has broken

Miagi's one condition, to which Mr. Miagi responds: "I have been teaching you karate! Now defend yourself!" Miagi makes his move at Daniel, who instinctively defends himself with an arm motion exactly like that used in one of his chores. Miagi throws in a kick and again Daniel prevents the kick with a motion used in his chores. After Daniel successfully defends himself from several more blows, Miagi simply walks away, leaving Daniel to discover what the master had known all along: skill comes from listening to the master.

I am challenged by the Master, Jesus. The Master says discipleship will cost you. Are you listening? What comes from this scripture passage are three things: Jesus says – 1. If you want to live like me, be prepared for sacrifice and suffering. Be prepared for ridicule, persecution, and misunderstanding. 2. Don't be afraid to stand up for me and to stand up for your faith so that I can stand up for you before your maker and creator. 3. And don't let anything ... anything ... come between me and you and the ministry we can have together.

Is Jesus really talking to me? His words suggest that I should automatically expect opposition because I am a Christian. Doesn't this almost seem like its someone else's problem? We don't really take a lot of heat for our faith, primarily because we're the dominant culture. We don't fear for our lives when we come to worship. We actually publish our worship times and unlock our doors and turn the lights on. We don't worry that our children will be kidnapped or killed just because we claim to be Christians. We don't worry that we will be placed in prison or executed because we sing, joyfully, loudly, songs of praise.

There are still places in this world where being a Christian is life-threatening, but we don't face that kind of danger for our convictions. That's not to say that our values and our faith aren't challenged. I would hope that our faith can challenge the values of the world.

A manager in a health care industry quit her job because she got tired of looking for ways to deny coverage to people who needed help. She says, "When I questioned my supervisor, he told me I knew where the door was and not to let it hit me on the way out."

A committed Christian right here in Madison, WI gave up a lucrative position to go to work for a 1/3 of his salary to manage a meal ministry for the hungry and the homeless. He really believes God is calling him to be a servant. Is he successful? He feeds people every night of the week. I would suppose that means he's successful.

A wealthy, elderly couple rewrote their will after seeing the plight of poor, sick children on the Wind River Reservation – the home of the Shoshone and Arapaho. They provided well for their two adult children, but willed a large portion of their estate to a Native American ministry that would offer health care and education ... and their children took them to court.

Okay, so maybe these aren't examples of severe persecution, but they are examples of committed disciples who stand up for Jesus. Committed folks who stand up because of their faith.

I don't know much about Rev. Jeremiah Wright. He sure has gotten a lot of publicity. His sermons, his statements, his leadership has received widespread criticism. Here's what he said to a reporter from the New York Times: "I am not here for political reasons for I am not a politician. I know that fact will surprise many of you, because many of the corporate-owned media have made it seem as if I have announced that I am running for the Oval Office. I am not running for the Oval Office. I've been running for Jesus for a long, long time, and I'm not tired yet."

I've been running for Jesus for a long, long time, and I'm not tired yet. I'm running for Jesus. I hope we all can say that.

In the face of persecution, or let's say in the face of criticism, or in the face of risk-taking for our faith, Jesus says we have nothing to fear. He stresses that three times in this passage alone. Remember, the skill of discipleship comes from listening to the master. Are you hearing what Jesus is saying? Don't be afraid to be challenged, because your faith is your foundation. Jesus says, as long as you believe in me, your foundation won't be shaken. We are not to be held hostage by fear. Fear is a powerful thing ... it can hold us in bondage so that simply moving forward is sometimes not even possible. In the face of decision making and risk taking, Jesus says we have nothing to fear. God knows the number of hairs on our head ... that's important we are.

Now for point #3. In our translation today Jesus says, “Don’t think I’ve come to make life cozy. I’ve come to cut ... to cut through the cozy domestic arrangements to free you for God.”

Maybe you’re more familiar with this translation: “don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth. No, I did not come to bring peace; I came to bring a sword.”

He’s talking about my family! Whatttt? Excuse me? This is a little hard for us to comprehend, ey? Especially because we’re dealing with the Prince of Peace himself!

In Matthew’s church, the author of this Gospel, people did have to choose between their family members and their faith. Early Christianity was painful because it was life-changing, world-changing, and not everyone was ready to make that change, so there were families that were split apart.

This is in no way an invitation to neglect or abandon family commitments, but what it does say to us is this: anything that becomes more important than the mission Christ has called you to, is not worthy of your attention. That’s a tough one. It sure isn’t fluffy, but Jesus wasn’t fluffy. He was rough around the edges. There were times, gee, like now, when he was raw and offending. He came to change the world. I read this passage as: don’t let anything separate you from the ministry God has called you to do.

During lunch today, I was having conversation with my two of my children, the boys, as we were sharing a pizza. For some reason, the topic of

discipleship came up. My son John has just arrived home from church camp as of yesterday, so he's experiencing a kind of camper high and Henry, he's 6, is just so happy to have his John back home ... or so I thought. Henry informed us that he's a disciple, to which he defined as helping others. I was impressed and pleased that my child is above average in terms of his faith language. I left the kitchen and went into the other room. As soon as I left, the boys started fighting over the crust. Henry doesn't eat the crust so he leaves it on his plate. John said, I'll eat your crust and then it doesn't go to waste. Oh, but no, we can't share our crust with our older brother. I yelled from the living room, "Henry, it doesn't really sound like you're being a disciple" to which Henry replied, "Jesus never had pizza and if he did, he would have never shared it with his brother or with those other guys." To which John replied, "You mean, his disciples?" To which Henry replied, "Shut up." I was a little premature in praising above average faith language.

I asked you earlier: is Jesus talking to us? In the reading from Matthew today, is Jesus talking to you? That's a good question. One Bible commentator points out; Jesus isn't speaking to the crowd. He's speaking only to the 12 ... those he has trained, those he has mentored, those he has chosen. If you're comfortable enough with the ways things are, if you're comfortable with the status quo, then maybe Jesus isn't talking to you. Maybe there aren't any expectations placed on your life. But if you want to see change in the world, and if you're willing to be bold enough to be an instrument of God's grace and a representative of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, then listen up and learn from the master. Skill comes from the listening to the master.

Wax on ... wax off. Amen.