June 22, 2014 – 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Wow, today’s Gospel was a hard one to hear. Here’s some of what Jesus says to his disciples:

"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.”

What happened to Gentle Jesus, meek and mild? This is some harsh stuff!

This passage is from the second of what’s called the five discourses of Matthew. The first is also called the Sermon on the Mount, which we didn’t hear because Easter fell so late this year. But never fear, we are going to become GOOD friends with Matthew this summer and fall, so you’ll get to hear the other discourses in some detail.

This discourse is sometimes called the Mission Discourse or the Little Commission, in contrast to the Great Commission that we heard about last week. To set the scene, Jesus is in the process of sending the disciples out on the road to preach, heal the sick, and cast out demons. He’s already told them to take nothing with them, and that he’s sending them out like sheep among the wolves.

Then he follows those instructions up with these words, which are a brutally realistic description of what life as his disciple is going to be like. You’d almost think he was trying to discourage people from being his followers. He must have scared those apostles to death.

Have you ever played the game with yourself of “What’s the worst that could happen?” I have a confession to make. I used to have a phobia about talking on the phone, and especially cold calling someone I don’t know. I didn’t mind sending e-mails to people I don’t know, or if they called me. But calling someone without some kind of prior set up was torture to me. I’m a lot better now, but it still makes me pretty uncomfortable.

Part of the life of an aspiring opera singer is doing just that, though. Things like calling directors and conductors to ask to audition for them or calling agents to try to get them to represent me are all a necessary part of the business – a part that I absolutely hated. So I’d play a round of “What’s the worst that could happen,” before making calls.

What’s the worst that could happen? They could hang up on me. They could be snotty and mean. They could laugh at me. Then I would realize that the person I was calling would probably NOT do any of those things in reality, which would help me overcome my fear and dial the phone.

But there was another “worst thing” that could happen. That would be that I wouldn’t get up the nerve to call at all, and that I would miss a possible opportunity to sing.

Jesus might be playing a game of “What’s the worst that could happen,” in today’s Gospel, but given the realities of first century Palestine, his predictions are pretty likely to come true. So why does Jesus highlight the horrors that await the disciples? Because by naming out loud the worst that could happen he is helping to free them from fear.

Because the real worst thing that could happen would be for them to not go at all. But to send the disciples out into a hostile world without a realistic idea of what they were facing would be to send soldiers unarmed into battle. However, in the middle of this stark depiction, Jesus tells them three times not to be afraid.

In the midst of telling them that they may face death, he provides this lovely image of God’s love and care for them.

“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.”

It’s not just that we’re worth more than a couple of inexpensive birds, but that God loves us intimately, right down to the last hair on our heads. We can trust in him to help us.

So Jesus is talking about the real cost of discipleship here, and not sugar coating it, even as he’s telling his disciples to not be afraid. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, writes, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Bonhoeffer really understood this cost. He had escaped Nazi Germany and was teaching in America, but he chose to return because he felt that he wouldn’t be able to minister to a post-Nazi Germany if he hadn’t lived there during the worst of it. He was captured by the SS and executed three weeks before the war ended. And yet, as his letters from prison showed, he never lost his faith and trust in God.

Well, we are not likely to face death here in church, nor are we likely to face much persecution outside of it, but we ARE still being called to be disciples. And the worst thing that could happen would be that we would ignore that call and live our lives as if Jesus never died for us.

What DOES discipleship cost us today? What fears do we have to face head on to follow Jesus? Our challenges are definitely different today from those of the early disciples, and in some ways more complex. We might have to give up some of our security to be a disciple. Tithing is a good example of that. Giving a tenth of our income to God is scary because we might run out of money and not have enough for what you need.

And there are the social implications of being a follower of Jesus. In this post-Christian world, professing any kind of faith opens you up to ridicule and derision, which could have a greater impact on your life than sticks and stones. It could, as Jesus predicted, cause a rift in your family or in your circle of friends, and cause you to have to choose.

Or being a disciple may mean giving up things that we think make us comfortable or happy, or giving up habits or lifestyles that take our time and attention away from God. This might be the hardest thing to face because many of those things aren’t overtly bad, and why should we give up harmless things that we enjoy just to follow Jesus?

Those are just some things that came off the top of MY head, which probably means that they are fears that I face every day to be a disciple of Jesus. I don’t know what your fears are, but I do know that they have to be named and faced in order to choose discipleship.

Jesus is sending us out, just as he did his apostles. And he’s telling us to trust in God to provide and care for us, even if we are persecuted for his sake. Because the worst thing that could happen is that our fears cause us to choose not to go.

Amen.