

Trouble on the way; a sermon on Matthew 10: 34-39. Rev. Rosalind Gnat November 11, 2017

“Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword. ‘I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Your enemies will be right in your own household!’ ‘If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it.”

This is tough to hear. How could Jesus, the Prince of Peace, be saying this? Well – he probably didn’t, though there’s every reason to believe Jesus was pretty disappointed in the way his vision of the kingdom of heaven on earth was unfolding. Probably all the freedom fighters and terrorists fighting the Romans and fighting each other, made it clear to him that peace on earth was not going to happen in the near future. Maybe, in a moment of frustration, he looked around and said just those words, *“Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword.”* I want to think he would have said those words with great sadness.

“The Gospel according to Matthew was written 70 or so years after Jesus had been crucified, and whoever the writer was, was living in a time of the sword. Jesus was born in 6 ad., the year emperor Quirinius set up the taxation system for the newly acquired Roman colony of Judea. For Joseph and his pregnant wife, that meant traveling to Bethlehem to register for the tax.

A group of rebels – freedom fighters arose in rebellion against the taxation; they were called Zealots – meaning zealous for God. Their goal was the overthrow of Roman rule over the Jewish people. Another group arose with the same goal, but different methods – they were the Sicarii, or dagger men. They fought for the overthrow of Rome as well, but were willing to kill their own people who were not in favor of the call to war. They were 1st century terrorists. “We must destroy the Roman Empire and we must destroy Jews who cooperate with the Roman Empire. We will kill all collaborators; no King but God,” and other such slogans emerged from these groups. Allahu Akbar – God is the greatest.

This was the world in which Jesus began his ministry: a world not so unlike our own. Terrorists, fanatics, freedom fighters, corrupt officials, brutal regimes. Religious leaders at odds with each other. What has really changed in this world of ours?

The Pharisees were a scholarly group with a reputation for knowing the details of the mosaic law – they were the orthodox group. The Sadducees were not friendly with the Pharisees, but seemed to have been very friendly with the wealthy and with people in power in general – they were the social-political group. The majority of Jews were, of course, people who lived their lives and practiced their religion just like their parents and grandparents had taught them. Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons: as much as they wanted things to go back to the idyllic and rarely real peaceful times of the past, history pushed them toward conflict; not only with the Romans, but among themselves.

I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Your enemies will be right in your own household!

This should sound familiar to anyone who knows the political history of the 20th century: dictatorships are made powerful by the masses of people who swear loyalty to the regime and its ideals: communist Russia, Nazi Germany, Maoist China, British India, – I could go on. Daughter against mother; son against father. This was Rome's method of controlling its vast colonial holdings as well: coopt a few to control the rest. The method works until, at some point, it doesn't. In the end, the iron curtain fell by the force peaceful, often prayerful, protest. The English lawyer Mahatma Gandhi used non-violent civil disobedience to help dislodge British rule. The women of Liberia put down the brutal dictator Charles Taylor through peaceful and persistent action. Martin Luther King, following Gandhi's path, lost his life while pursuing equality under the law for Black Americans. By the way, the Farmers Wars, inflamed by the Reformation, were another set of wars that tore families apart.

The message of Jesus is a message of peace. It is a powerful thing – resisting violence and injustice with peaceful means. It requires that we believe in a power higher and better than our own ability to fight sword for sword. Too often we cannot bring ourselves to believe in this highest good. During the United States Civil war, families were torn apart by divided loyalty. Brother fought against brother, son against father. The number of families in the United State that are being torn apart by vicious deportation practices; the ones that have been torn apart by political and ethical difference, likely count in the millions. Brother, sister, father, mother.

Jesus' method was non-violent political disobedience: publicly healing the sick; giving sermons and telling stories in public that were anything but favorable to the rich and the powerful; staging a "triumphal march" through the gates of Jerusalem in mockery of Caesar: any of these acts could have gotten him crucified and he knew it.

On Thursday, November 19th of 1863, President Abraham Lincoln delivered one of the speeches at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg Pennsylvania. He said, *"Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all (men) are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.*

What our gospel text describes is civil war. The gospel writer was in the middle of civil war, and that in the middle of Roman oppression. It was a horrible time. Death. Destruction. Starvation. Utter ruination. Was this what Jesus was advocating for his beloved people? If I believed that, I would leave this pulpit now and not ever return. Was he fearful that what did happen was likely to happen. Yes. Of course.

The only question I have left is this: do we have the courage to be the peacemakers, the humble, the merciful; to love our enemies instead of exacting an eye for an eye? Can we face up to seeking god's kingdom instead of the kingdom of commerce? Can we do these things?

Here are the last words of the last speech that a great Christian and lover of peace spoke on the night before he was assassinated:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live - a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

Amen