

Sermon on Matthew 10:24-39
Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 25, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Okay, let's admit it. We hate this passage from the gospel. When Jesus says "*I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*", it makes us very uncomfortable. Because we know Jesus is the one who promises to bring us peace with God, but here he is today talking about bringing a sword! Truth be known, I'd rather preach on "his eye is on the sparrow"! I can still remember back during Holy Week, reading in Matthew chapter 26, how Jesus was arrested by a crowd of police in the Garden of Gethsemane, led by Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus, and Peter took out his sword to defend Jesus, and cut off the ear of one of the slave of the high priest. Jesus said then, "*Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.*" That's the Jesus we know: proclaiming peace and non-violence in the face of adversity. So what gives here?

Could it be that in our passage today Jesus is not talking about violence, or returning violence for violence, but something else entirely? So I decided to do a little research. First I went online to Google Images, and typed "I have come not to bring peace, but a sword." And what did I find? A lot of violent images of swords and warfare. Like one ancient stained glass window image of a sword coming out of Jesus' head. Images of knights charging in full armor, attacking Muslims in the Crusades. Images of Jesus standing with a sword, or even a couple of Jesus with an Uzi. It seems there are internet bloggers who claims that in this text, Jesus is a proponent of violence against those who oppose "Christian values". I recall a conversation I had over ten years ago at the State Capitol after I had testified in a hearing against Conceal and Carry legislation, by quoting Jesus saying "*those who live by the sword will die by the sword.*" Afterwards a man from the gun lobby with an opposite point of view quoted this passage from today's gospel "*I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*" to make Jesus a proponent for conceal and carry legislation. So I don't like this text!

So what did Jesus mean by this metaphor? He said this in a time when insurrection was plotted by those who opposed the Roman occupiers of Israel, and Herod Antipas, their puppet king. When Matthew wrote his gospel, Christians who declared that they followed Jesus were often disowned by their families. To say you followed Jesus often brought division into a family or synagogue. So this is the context in which Matthew wrote down Jesus words.

For the truth is, the gospel of Jesus is not always received as "good news". Often the words of Jesus bring division. And when Jesus tells the truth to us, and the allegiances we hold, or actions we take that are opposed to the truth of God,

Jesus's words can cut like a sword! The peace Jesus came to bring is based on the truth of God – so what is opposed to God's truth can only bring division. If Jesus' words bring division and not peace, they are like a sword. The truth can bring tension. Words can cut like a knife. But this is better than the peace which only covers up a wound without healing it, allowing it to fester!

So we have been hearing and seeing a lot these days that brings division rather than peace, which threatens to tear us apart. We have heard politicians and leaders blame one another for our nation's problems and for the violence. We have witnessed gun violence aimed at some of those leaders. We have also seen violence committed by terrorists and by police against innocent persons, for very different reasons. These have been scary days, with hard images on the news and on our computer screens. We have seen violent images in the video recorded by Diamond Reynolds, who recorded them on her phone immediately after Philando Castille had been shot by a panicked police officer last summer. Then we heard the verdict of the jury after the trial of Officer Yanez for manslaughter: *not guilty on all counts*. The reactions to the verdict have been emotional and have varied, bringing their own division. Then we saw the dashboard monitor recording of the officer shooting Philando, and the disturbing video of his girlfriend in handcuffs sitting in the police squad car for 45 minutes after the shooting, being comforted by her six-year-old daughter. Is this justice – a police officer shoots a black man seated in his car just seconds after being pulled over for a broken taillight? Did we all see the same video? The anger, pain and grief in this community has been well-documented. It led to demonstrations on the streets, two times shutting down Interstate 94, just a block away from this church. We cannot avoid the divisions and the pain expressed over pain and injury done to black men, women and children by police, even here in our own hometown. We want to bring healing and reconciliation, but we don't know how, because just saying so sounds far too easy, and seems to avoid the painful reality that too many of our sisters and brothers endure all their lives. So what should we as Christians do or say in such times?

The words of Jesus in the gospel speak to all this, and if we are faithful to them, the words can cut like a sword instead of bringing a healing balm. Like the prophet Jeremiah said, "*From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace, when there is no peace!'*" Truth can seem to divide us rather than unite us, when unity and peace are what we deeply desire. But do we want peace at the cost of truth? Too often for Christians that is the case. The church always wants to move too fast to grace, healing and unity – before the words of offense have been understood, or confession can be uttered, before the hard truth can be heard. We must resist that temptation to reconciliation and forgiveness before words of confession are said, or repentance is possible. Like Philando's mother, we should be "mad as hell."

Is there a use for all this tension? The wisdom of medical science is instructive here. In 1969 Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a book called *On Death and Dying*, based on her observations of people going through the grieving process. She observed five stages of grief when a loved one dies: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. Everyone experiences these stages differently, and the stages may come in different order, but it is critical to recognize these stages and let people work through them in their own time. Acceptance is the *last* stage. We cannot pass over the anger that comes with death, especially when death has been unexpected, sudden or violent, as was the case with Philando Castille. It helps explain the shared anger and grief that the community is going through, especially by African Americans, who have endured such violent trauma over and over in the course of this nation's history. How can we rationally ask for peace and unity so soon after a verdict that seems to *deny* the common shared experience of violent death at the hands of police, which happens again and again, without consequence for police and without changes being made? It seems that we are all living in the midst of insanity, caused by sin, made deadly by the violence of racism and easy access to guns. We share in the insanity.

But the Church too often only calls for peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and unity. It is true that these are the goals, the hoped-for outcomes of Christians speaking and acting in love. But peace and unity are not the first step. They are the ultimate goal of many words and actions that are necessary to get us there.

First must come words of truth about what has happened, and what we all see happening – which requires words of dialog that we can all share. As a white person I can't speak the truth about what people in the black community are seeing and experiencing. As a pastor I can't speak words of healing until I hear, understand and accept the words of truth from those who suffer the most. Whether it is from the black community who experience racism and violence, or the undocumented immigrants who experience racial hatred and the fear of arrest or deportation, or the woman living in the terror of domestic violence or the young person who is transgender who experiences bullying or is disowned by their own family – we can't proclaim reconciliation and unity until we first hear their truth!

We have heard in the gospel how Jesus came to bring the peace of God to us on earth. We have also heard how Jesus' truth often set sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, families against families, church against synagogues, Jew against Greek and against Roman. We also know and experience the divisions that happen today between people of different faiths, because of race, beliefs, politics, language, culture, gender or class. We sometimes seem so divided that we cannot see our way back to unity or common ground.

Allowing such divisions and hatred based on gender, race, religion or class - that is our sin. But as the Apostle Paul asked, "*should we continue in sin in order*

that grace may abound? By no means!” We cannot continue in our divisions against one another and just pronounce absolution and grace upon ourselves. The only way that our divisions and enmity can be overcome is by struggle, with faith, hope, and love, in relationship with Jesus Christ our Lord. We cannot do this ourselves. Thankfully, God sent Jesus, who entered into our darkness, to bring wisdom and hope, light and life to this world. Jesus brought the word of God’s truth, which sadly caused division instead of peace, and for this he was unjustly arrested, tried, judged and condemned to death. But after three days he rose again, with a promise to raise us also from death to life.

So what are we, the Church, to do these days? What is our role in all of these divisions by race, religion, politics or gender? It is not to just proclaim calm and ask for peace and unity. It is too late for that – or perhaps, too early! We must first open our ears to listen to the cries of pain and injustice from our neighbors. Then it is to confess our many sins of neglect and our failure to listen. This is the hardest part, and we must admit, we don’t do this very well. We don’t like to listen much. We would rather just find a remedy to our problems (which we can devise ourselves), and then proclaim the problem solved! Or just look away.

We must seek the wisdom and truth of God, which comes through the voice of Jesus – who often speaks through the person of our neighbor! Our neighbors are very angry now – mostly this is the anger which comes out of fear, and the frustration that nothing ever seems to change. So the time for avoidance or sugar-coating the problems and divisions caused by race and violence is over. Denial and neglect have not addressed them. Moving too quickly to grace hasn’t left us experiencing grace either! So we all need to pray for God’s direction.

Then we must stop, sit down, and listen to our neighbors. We must hear our neighbor’s truth and speak the truth about ourselves. We probably won’t like it. It might feel like being cut by a sword. But this is the first and necessary step. When we hear and accept our neighbors’ truth about racism and injustice in this country, including in the Church, then we will have hope, because we will have named it. Then we can ask for forgiveness from our neighbor. It may not seem like grace or peace yet, but we will be on our way.

I’m sorry that the Word has seemed so harsh today, but I cannot lie to you. The path to truth, peace and reconciliation is hard. The easy path only leads to denial. I know that the first thing we all want to hear today is a word of grace, amidst all this pain we see around us, or experience. But honestly, the word of good news from Jesus today is the word of truth that first cuts like a sword, but ultimately leads us to grace, because it is spoken in love. Can we begin to trust one another enough to listen to each other’s truth, out of love? Perhaps this is what it means to be baptized into Christ, follow Jesus and to carry his cross. Amen.

God of truth, give us courage to seek the truth of our neighbors, and to speak our own truth in love. Do not let us be discouraged, or be led into the temptations of denial. Lead us to the truth that brings us to confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation in our community, nation and world, so that we may find your peace

Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.