

Finders Weepers, Losers Keepers

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Yow! That sure doesn’t sound like something Jesus would say. I should rephrase that: it doesn’t sound like something the gentle, inoffensive, soft and cuddly Jesus of our imaginations would say. The *real* Jesus revealed to us in Holy Scripture definitely *did* say it. But as always, context is everything; so what’s going on here? How can it be that the Savior who is called “the Prince of Peace” and who conveys to the faithful the very peace of God which surpasses understanding say that he’s not come to bring peace but a sword?

For the past several weeks we’ve been in the portion of St. Matthew’s Gospel known as the “missionary discourse”. It comes toward the end of the first of Jesus’ three-year ministry. With his popularity on the rise, the crowds following him growing to unmanageably large levels, and the list of places he still wants to go to preach and teach virtually endless, Jesus decides it’s a good time to send his twelve closest disciples out to do some of the work of preparing people for the coming of God’s kingdom. This will greatly amplify his reach and provide the disciples with some good practical experience for the work they will later be doing when, after his death and resurrection, he sends them out build his Church, which is the kingdom of God on earth.

Mind you, they’re not ready for that. They haven’t yet got nor, do they even begin to understand the full Gospel of God’s grace and forgiveness through faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. That will come later. This is more of a practice run. Just the same, Jesus wants them to know in advance what they are going to face out there. This is what the missionary discourse is all about. It’s Jesus telling his disciples how things are going to be for them when they’re doing the work of ministry in his name. It’s not, as they might expect, going to be a cake walk. They aren’t going to see any red carpets rolled out for them. Nor are they going to be received by nothing but mobs of adoring fans. Quite the contrary, the message he gives them to proclaim is controversial. It’s offends people. It offends them first to hear that they are sinners who need to repent, and even more to hear that there is nothing they can do to earn their way back into the favor of God – that the only way of salvation is to trust in the merits of Jesus, to receive as a gift the righteousness he imputes through faith. On account of this, those who proclaim these truths will face opposition, resistance, and sometimes open hostility. In last week’s text we heard Jesus tell the disciples that they will be hated by all because of him.

And this should come as no surprise. This is a world full of sin. Here the authority of Satan to deceive people and to hold them in bondage reigns supreme. The Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus is an assault on Satan’s power. It’s a war we’re fighting, a war for people’s souls. We should expect that Satan and his allies are going to fight back. And they do: first with attempts to slander or discredit those who proclaim the Gospel, to ruin their reputations; and when that’s not enough, with threats or with actual incidents of violence.

This is what Jesus means when he says he’s not come to bring peace but a sword. That sword is his Word, and like a sword it cuts. It divides things like it did on the first days of creation when by his Word the Lord divided the light from the darkness and the dry land from the sea. So it is as his Word of Law and Gospel is proclaimed. Those who hear it and by the power of the Spirit believe it are divided from lies to truth, from darkness to light, from Satan’s kingdom to God’s, from sin to righteousness, from bondage to freedom, and from death to life.

They are also divided from the world of unbelievers to become the faithful children of God. And that's where the battle line appears: between people, between believers and unbelievers, between those who have the blessings of the Gospel and want to share them and those who want nothing to do with Jesus and his Gospel and may resent or openly oppose the faithful for believing what they do.

Certainly, we've seen this in the history of the Church, how the apostles and the members of the early church were persecuted first by the Jewish religious authorities and later by the Roman state. We see it today especially in Muslim majority countries. In some of them like Iran it's a crime to be a Christian. In others like Egypt Christians are treated as second class citizens and are often exposed to mob violence. To a much lesser extent we can see it here in our country where there is a growing tide of anti-Christian sentiment. This world will always be a hostile place for the members of Christ's Church. The battles will continue to be fought, we on our side armed only with the Word of God and those on the other side armed with whatever they can think of to throw at us.

But all of this has sort of a "us in here against them out there" feel to it. That's where the battle line is: out there. What Jesus is stressing in today's lesson is that the battle lines will appear in our own homes: a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a bride against her mother-in-law. A believer's enemies will be the members of their own household.

Love and loyalty between family members is one of the strongest weapons in the enemy's arsenal. So many especially in the early Church faced this: the Jewish or pagan father or mother who said to their son or daughter, "Because you have become a follower of Jesus, you are no child of mine. You must choose him or me." If they chose to remain faithful to Christ, they were disinherited, driven out, sometimes turned over to the authorities for punishment or maybe even death. It's that way still today for many in the Jewish, Muslim, and other faith communities. For them the cost of discipleship is the loss of the love and support of members of their family. It's a high price to pay, but Jesus makes it clear: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me." A believer cannot allow any human relationship to take a higher priority than faithfulness to Christ.

Now I doubt that any of us have had to or will have to carry a cross quite that heavy, being disowned by family for faithfulness to Jesus. But it does come to us in more subtle ways. It happens when we are tempted to disregard or downplay *part* of Jesus' Word for the sake of peace in the family. The same Word of Jesus that divides us from the world of unbelievers also divides us from other professing Christians. The reason is because they deny part of what Jesus has said, like, for example, "This is my body. This is my blood. Baptism now saves you." The battle takes the shape of your Baptist brother-in-law complaining loudly and bitterly that he is not allowed to commune at a Lutheran altar and you're tempted to say to the pastor, "Can't we just let him do it this one time? Just so he'll stop making such a fuss? It's causing so much turmoil in our family."

Yes. The Word of Jesus does that. What's more important to you: the Word of Jesus or peace in the family? That kind of turmoil is part of the cost of discipleship. It's a cross we must carry.

It comes down to the question: what are you in this for? Jesus says, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." What does this mean? It means that we are tempted to think that this present age is all there is and all that matters. My goal ought to be to live the best life I can right now, make a lot of money, collect a lot of toys,

enjoy my family and friends, avoid every kind of conflict, and accomplish all the things on my bucket list. Then I will have lived the good life. No, says Jesus. That's a life lost. Its end is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The life of true discipleship is about losing. It's about letting go of worldly attachments. It's about being willing to suffer all: the loss of family, friends, reputation, freedom, even your very life, rather than depart from Jesus or to deny even part of his truth. It means taking up and bearing whatever cross that faithfulness to Jesus brings about. That, says Jesus, is an eternal life gained. And that's where your focus ought to be. It's truly a case of finders weepers, losers keepers.

May our Lord Jesus by his Word and the power of his Spirit make and keep us such faithful disciples, that none lose the reward he grants to those who are righteous by faith in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!