

Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist

Matthew 10:24-33

“Disciples aren’t greater than their teacher, and slaves aren’t greater than their master. It’s enough for disciples to be like their teacher and slaves like their master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, it’s certain that they will call the members of his household by even worse names.

“Therefore, don’t be afraid of those people because nothing is hidden that won’t be revealed, and nothing secret that won’t be brought out into the open. What I say to you in the darkness, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, announce from the rooftops. Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body but can’t kill the soul. Instead, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Aren’t two sparrows sold for a small coin? But not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father knowing about it already. Even the hairs of your head are all counted. Don’t be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.

“Therefore, everyone who acknowledges me before people, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven. But everyone who denies me before people, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

1. God’s Picture

Some first-graders were asked to draw a picture of God in their Sunday school class. Their finished products contained some interesting theology. One child depicted God in the form of a brightly colored rainbow. Another presented God as an old man coming out of the clouds.

An intense little boy drew God with a remarkable resemblance to Superman. The best entry, however, came from a little girl. She said, “I didn’t know what God looked like, so I just drew a picture of my daddy.”

Today is Father’s Day, and a happy Father’s Day to all fathers.

None of us really knows what God looks like. Wouldn't it be interesting if we thought God looked like someone we loved—someone we respected?

It also might be interesting to know that for some, God might look like you.

2. Jesus' Instructions

Jesus' instructions to His disciples prior to their first mission continue in today's gospel reading. He has been telling them about all the dangers and hardships they may have to put up with. He ends by saying—in effect—“What do you expect? A disciple is not greater than his teacher. If the world gives me a bad time, it will give you one too.”

So what does Jesus do—sell them life insurance—give them bullet-proof vests—teach them how to diffuse conflict? He says, “Don't ever be afraid of your enemies and critics. Event hough it's not obvious now, the truth will come out finally. So, speak up; shout it out; stand and deliver.” Oh, my. We don't want to be heroes, especially not religious ones. It's all we can do to get to church on Sundays and we're supposed to be shouting the word of God from the housetops? No way—we're afraid.

But Jesus doesn't quit. “Stop being afraid”; “Stop being afraid”—not just once but always. “Stop being afraid of people who can kill the body but not the soul.” The point is that people can hurt us only temporarily because life comes from God. Even if they kill us, God the Author of life will raise us. “Don't fear people; fear God”—the one who can kill both body and soul.”

Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus is saying that the voice of the people is not the voice of God. We worry way too much about what other people say or think about us and far too little about what God thinks about us. We know this is true. We've heard it before. But, it's easier said than done.

3. Evangelism

Running like a thread through our gospel reading is the evangelistic call to proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Jesus will not remain hidden away but will be brought out for all to see. When God whispers to us in the darkness, we need to shout it for all to hear from the rooftops. If we share and give testimony to the life-giving power of Jesus, we will be acknowledged before God; but if we deny or fail to speak of this testimony, we may be forgotten by God, also.

Why are we afraid of evangelism? Is it because we do not want to be seen as religious fanatics for fundamentalists? Is it because we believe that it will turn people off to us, and in the name of popularity we want people to like us? Is it because we simply forget to share our faith and what it means to us because we are so busy and consumed by the hecticness of modern life? Or is it because our faith is so lukewarm that it does not rise to the level of enough importance to share with others?

When we truly stop to think about it, as people of faith, God has given us everything, absolutely everything in life itself. Jesus, as the incarnation of God, was the very embodiment of this life and sacrificed His life so that we might truly live. If we have been given such a gift as life itself, should we not be willing to share the acknowledgment of this gift with everyone we met?

Think for a moment of the biggest gift you have been given by someone else. It probably isn't a material object, for that only fades with time. For many, the biggest gifts have been relational and spiritual: the gift of time with loving family, the shared experiences that make life worth living, the gift of a lifelong marriage partner, children, and great friends. I believe all these gifts ultimately come from God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. These gifts are of such magnitude the least I can do is tell others about such blessings.

This witnessing doesn't have to be preachy or dramatic. It simply needs to be sincere and authentic. We all need to find ways to share our faith in a way that has integrity for us. But the bottom line is that we must share it!

4. Effective Teaching

Robert Frost's first assignment for a class of teachers was to read "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." This was Mark Twain's famous story about a frog that lost a jumping contest because he had been pumped full of quail shot. When the class next assembled they were mystified because they did not understand what this story had to do with a course in education.

Frost patiently explained to them that this particular story was about teachers. He said that there were two kinds of teachers. There was the kind that filled you with so much quail shot that you could not move and the kind that gave you a little prod on the behind so that you could jump to the skies.

What kind of teacher do you think Jesus was?

5. What God Can't Do

A Sunday school teacher was examining her pupils after a series of lessons on God's omnipotence. She asked: "Is there anything God can't do?"

There was silence. One boy held up his hand. The teacher, disappointed that the lesson's point had been missed, asked, "Well, just what is it that God can't do?" The boy replied, "Well, He can't please everybody."

That is one thing Jesus was preparing His disciples for. There would be people who would not accept the good news. They were to be prepared for that.

6. Church Growth

Despite the silly joke I'm about to tell you about church growth, Jesus was a wise and competent leader, as our gospel reading shows. But here's the joke: Church growth must not matter much. After all, Jesus started out with 12 and ended with 11.

I told you it was silly.

The first part of the 10th chapter of Matthew, which we read last week, shows Jesus gathering His original 12 disciples together and preparing them to go out and preach the good news to the people He calls "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." At least for the moment, He asks the twelve to ignore preaching to the Gentiles and Samaritans. Presumably, He'll get to them. As, of course, He and His followers do.

But what is the good news He asks the twelve to proclaim? Is it that Jesus has come to die for their sins? Or that if they declare that Jesus is their personal Lord and Savior they'll go directly to heaven, not needing to pass "go" or collect \$200 on the way? Not exactly.

Rather, here's what Jesus calls the good news: "The kingdom of heaven has come near." He is insisting, in other words, that people can live in God's kingdom today by being compassionate, loving, caring, just and merciful, which are the values that will reign supreme when that kingdom finally comes in full flower in the future.

7. Fruit Inspection

Forest Wells is one of the District Superintendents in the Wisconsin Conference. He recently wrote about his grandfather, who once said, "We should not judge, but we are to be fruit inspectors." That phrase sounded even a bit too judgmental to Forrest. Yet, if we are not assessing the fruit of our lives, how do we know if we are living up to the potential God has placed

within us? The Greek philosopher Socrates said, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Scripture and philosophy point to meaning and purpose in life to make a difference.

This is a season of fruit inspection in our society, the church and in our lives. Systems of racial injustice, economic inequity and “Man’s inhumanity to man” are daily being laid forth in local, national and international news. The church as the most segregated Sunday institution pauses in uncomfortable reflection and discussion about how the church contributes to and participates in systems of oppression and injustice. We look inward and see how our early upbringing might have instilled default attitudes of racial bias that still needs work today. It all seems so overwhelming to see social upheaval around us and within us.

Yet there is good news. God is at work within us in order that we may produce more fruit. What kind of fruit? The Fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. Those fruits enable me to live in a more Christ-like manner and advocate for justice for the marginalized and to work for change in systems that diminish the human dignity in any person. We pray that we can be receptive to the work of God is doing within us and within the church of Jesus Christ.

Remember that God’s desire in this fruit growing business is not to harm but to bring greater health and wholeness. May we stay connected to God and one another in this season of discomfort as we face multiple viruses of Covid-19, racial inequities and injustice of many types. May we bear good fruit with Christ who is our peace.

8. Someone Who Loves You

In his book, “Disappointment with God”, writer Philip Yancey relates a touching story from his own life. One time on a visit to his mother—who had been widowed years earlier, in the month of Philip’s first birthday. They

spent the afternoon together looking through a box of old photos. A certain picture of him as an eight-month-old baby caught his eye. Tattered and bent, it looked too banged up to be worth keeping, so he asked her why, with so many other better pictures of him at the same age, she had kept this one.

Yancey writes, “My mother explained to me that she had kept the photo as a memento, because during my father’s illness it had been fastened to his iron lung.” During the last four months of his life, Yancey’s father lay on his back, completely paralyzed by polio at the age of twenty-four, encased from the neck down in a huge, cylindrical breathing unit. With his two young sons banned from the hospital due to the severity of his illness, he had asked his wife for pictures of her and their two boys. Because he was unable to move even his head, the photos had to be jammed between metal knobs so that they hung within view above him—the only thing he could see. The last four months of his life were spent looking at the faces he loved.

Philip Yancey writes, “I have often thought of that crumpled photo, for it is one of the few links connecting me to the stranger who was my father—someone I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent all day, every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me... The emotions I felt when my mother showed me the crumpled photo were the very same emotions I felt that February night in a college dorm room when I first believed in a God of love. Someone is there, I realized. Someone is there who loves me. It was a startling feeling of wild hope, a feeling so new and overwhelming that it seemed fully worth risking my life on.”