

June 25, 2017

Take Up Your Cross

Matthew 10: 24-39

The very ending of Matthew's gospel may be familiar to you. It's one of the named passages of scripture that you may recognize as the "Great Commission." Jesus has been raised from the dead and is about to ascend to the Father, when he says:

Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

But for Matthew, this isn't the first time the disciples are commissioned. Not by a long shot. In fact, it may look tame and a little less great in comparison to Jesus' other instructions to the disciples for embracing their mission. Chapter 10 is a whole chapter dedicated to sending the twelve out to proclaim the good news that the "Kingdom has come near" to a very particular audience – the lost sheep of the house of Israel. We haven't gotten to the "all nations" part just yet. And reading that chapter will remind us that we are a far piece from the 1950's and 60's model of church that clung to the "Great Commission" as instructions for welcoming families, and baptizing cute babies, and building fellowship halls with multiple Sunday School classrooms, and proclaiming that we have Jesus with us always because we have his portrait up in the hallway. Need I remind you of what that portrait looks like? The one I've seen most often is of a very Caucasian- looking Jesus who is cuddling that one lost sheep like a new puppy. Remember, I grew up with that model too in the early 70's. It's comfortable and it was comforting. But it isn't the whole of the gospel.

Chapter 10 reminds us that carrying out the mission of Jesus is a dangerous business and it is no Sunday-only enterprise. The disciples have a job, and that job is to cast out unclean spirits and cure diseases. They are to do this job free of charge and live off the kindness of strangers. When doing their work, they are to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near knowing that some will welcome them; and others most certainly won't. And the most apt analogy Jesus can think of is that they are being sent out like sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore, they should be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. Jesus tells them, point blank, that they will be hated because of his name. This isn't our sheep-cuddling Jesus!

This is the sword-wielding, family shattering, throw your life to the wolves and follow me Jesus. This is the "pick up your own cross" Jesus, the better "know what you're willing to die for" Jesus, who makes us keenly aware that our casual Sunday morning commitment to the Christian life is perhaps not what he had in mind.

This is a scary Jesus, a rather unknown to us Jesus, who makes big bold demands of his followers. He suggests, somewhat arrogantly so, that his "worthy" followers will reject family if they have to and their own lives if they must to become disciples. Those who have scrambled to preserve their miserable lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives might find out that they have achieved something more. This path leads irreversibly towards a cross, and the weight of that cross will be yours to bear if you choose to follow Jesus.

Now I'm really going to geek out here for just a moment, but the Abingdon New Interpreters' Study Bible has some amazing footnotes on this chapter that I really enjoyed reading. The one on verse 38 about taking up your cross reads like a mini-sermon. Listen to what contributing author Warren Carter has to say: *"This way of life is the way of the cross. This image should not be trivialized to refer to some little burden or inconvenience. Rather, it denotes the shame, pain, social rejection,*

violence, humiliation, and marginalization of crucifixion. Rome crucified those who threatened its control over society, such as traitors, violent criminals, and foreigners. The cross divided citizen from non-citizen, the accepted from the rejected. To take up the cross is to identify with those who threaten the empire. It is to refuse to be intimidated into compliance. It is to be at cross-purposes with imperial commitments. And it is to recognize the limits of Rome's power that could not keep the crucified Jesus dead!" (New Interpreters' Study Bible, p. 1763) Now that's how to write a footnote! I also had a lot of admiration and a knowing chuckle for the footnote on verses 16-23 which reads, *"Mission is difficult. To confront the status quo with God's empire means the empire strikes back."*

Carter is right. Mission is difficult, and I would add that Christian mission can be life-threatening. Thinking anything but – is to trivialize the fact that we have put at the center of our religious faith, a man who was shamefully executed by the empire with collusion from his own religious tribe. Jesus expects his followers, his disciples, his friends and close associates to be a threat to the normal way of life. They were sent out to heal the broken in mind, body, and spirit. They were to do so without concern for their own well being. They were to proclaim a Kingdom, not of this world, that was as close as the air you breathe. This Kingdom offered freedom to the enslaved, abundance to the poor, release to the captive, and status to the marginalized. They were to cast out evil – uncover it – expose its deep secrets and uncover its insidious lies. And meanwhile, Jesus tells them, do not fear. Those who don't like it can kill your body, but they cannot take your soul. Some condolence! Again, this is pretty terrifying, especially if we look to this as our model for mission rather than somehow trying to convince ourselves that this age of persecution has passed.

If we are to pick up our own crosses, and be willing to sacrifice our own lives, what will it be for? That's the big, big question, isn't it? Listen again to the wisdom of the biblical footnote writer: "This image should not be trivialized to refer to some little burden or inconvenience." Indeed this is

so. Your “cross to bear” is not having to hear your cousin’s insensitive comments at family gatherings. Your “cross to bear” isn’t a regular old annoyance, or even a significant ongoing problematic thing of some sort. Your cross will make itself known in your most closely held passion, your most intense reaction to injustice, your deepest compassion. It is what you choose to do even when every possible obstacle is put in your way. It is your mission. Your purpose. Your destiny. Your reason for living, and the ditch you are willing to die in. And I have to ask, “Does it follow along in the footsteps of Jesus?”

We claim to know Jesus, but is it the safe and cuddly Jesus or this fierce and demanding Jesus? Are they even close to the same person? I’m not sure exactly how to answer that myself. I am grateful to have grown up in those tile floor Sunday School classrooms that smelled of crayons and were taught by gentle women who had patience for all my questions at least for an hour or so. As a child, I needed to know the Jesus who would pick up lost sheep and welcome children like me. But now, I am fully aware that we need the Jesus who asks far more of us, the Jesus who begs us to bring healing to a broken and hurting world, who puts us in the uncomfortable position of shining light into the darkness, and who claims that the Kingdom of God is near at hand in a world where big government and sectarian religion still see that as a threat to their own power and authority.

So how am I going to tell you to pick up your own cross when I’m not exactly sure what my own cross looks like? As a mother and a pastor, I can tell you that I am fiercely protective of “my own people,” and likely willing to die for those in my circle were I given the right provocation. But my life right now is good and comfortable, so there’s a reasonable chance I may not quite be going far enough in my scope of healing and naming and claiming for the sake of the gospel. We all have to look at those balances in our own lives. Jesus willingly walked toward his cross and yet prayed in sweat and blood that there might be a different outcome. Are we being courageous in the face of

power or stupid in confronting the wrong things? Are we fearfully stifling the gospel or protectively raising our children to know the love of Jesus? Do we take enough risks? I dare say that in today's church, we probably aren't taking too many risks. What I can ask is that you give some time to this concept in prayer. Ask Jesus to lead you toward your cross. For each of us, it will be different. Allow him to take away your fear and embolden you for the mission he is calling you to do. *Mission is difficult. To confront the status quo with God's empire means the empire strikes back.* But the followers of Jesus are assured of God's presence as they offer resistance to the world's ways. Jesus reminds anyone who acknowledges him before others, he will acknowledge before God in heaven; and that the reverse of that is also true – deniers of the true Jesus will be denied. May Christ in his wisdom and assurance help us stay faithful to the path. Amen.