

## **Necessary Surgery – Matthew 10:24-29**

I remember the phone call from my beloved family member telling me that there was an abnormality on her mammogram. At least, that was the word that was used – abnormality. She didn't want to concern me, so she waited for not one, but two biopsies, an ultrasound, MRI and blood work to tell me. "They are calling it an abnormality," she said. "But, I know the likely outcome. It's the C word, I just know it is."

Then began the process: She met with an oncologist. It was likely stage 1 in situ breast cancer. Then, she met with a surgeon, who recommended it be removed first and then based upon the surgery; they would decide what else to do. But, my family member, in her decision to fight this disease with every ounce and fiber in her being, knew that in order for the healing and remission to happen, first the cancer had to be taken out. She had to be wounded to heal. She had to go through the treatments which were worse than the disease that it was at that time, in

order to be restored. She had to go through worse to find wholeness and she had to do that willingly.

It was a necessary surgery or else the cancer would grow. It would fester. It would invade her cells. In simple terms, it had to be cut out by the skill of a surgeon to restore her life to herself. Today, she is in remission, thanks be to God. But, I know that everyone hearing this can relate. You know someone who was willing to get sicker to get better. You know someone, maybe you, that the healing process took a wound to bring you back to a place of restoration. Of course you didn't want to, but it was necessary. You had to.

**"I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," Jesus said.**

Is this Jesus the Christ saying this here in Matthew's Gospel? Known to followers of the Way as the Prince of Peace who is saying these words? The One who said in John chapter 14, "Peace I give you." Is this the One who, in Luke's Gospel, was born under angel song, declaring peace on earth, goodwill to all? Is

this the One who in Mark chapter 9 tells his disciples that they need to be at peace with one another in love, or the Messiah who said as the Resurrected One to his disciples, "Peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives?"

**"I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."**

Whoa. Causing division in families; bringing division instead of peace; Tough love here, Jesus! And, if we take this phrase here literally and not metaphorically, I can see how this would be a dangerous Jesus, one that is out of character, one that people have used to divide people, excuse atrocities, and wage religious wars. It just doesn't fit the Good News of the Gospel!

*Or maybe it does.* Just listen a bit to the reading that Pastor Julie grappled with last week that leads into today's Gospel and I think we shall see they are connected where Jesus said:

**"See I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. Beware of those who will hand you over to councils and flog**

**you in the synagogues. You will be dragged before governors and kings because of me...a man against his father...Even brothers will betray brothers..."**

In other words, when proclaiming the Gospel OF peace, there are going to be people who don't like it because it disrupts. It challenges the status quo and it's quite risky to stick your neck out for the Gospel in any time, including this time. That's what Jesus is speaking about here, not that we aren't to work towards peace, but the kind of peace Jesus gives us is not the kind that makes everyone happy and being careful not to ruffle any feathers over. It's the kind of peace that brings about changed relationships, the kind that brings about just systems for the sake of the Gospel OF peace.

The sword Jesus speaks of is the kind a skilled surgeon uses that although it may cause a wound, a wound leads to healing and wholeness. It is not a journey that we necessarily want or a surgery we choose, but God calls us to it because it is what disciples do if they are to follow a

cross. To follow Jesus means entering into necessary surgery as individuals and as the church together, being able to enter into division that we may not want so that all may live in a just and saved world.

If we aren't willing to enter into division to get to a place of peace, hoping that things instead will just be comfortable or go away, we will never be whole, the wound will be open. The cancer will simply grow, which is why it has to eventually be addressed or it will be addressed for us.

**“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”**

Each of us has a responsibility as a follower of the Way not to cover up divisions and ignore them, but to work through them despite how hard they are. These can be personal divisions in our lives with family members or corporate divisions within the church, the nation or the world. We do this because the way to healing, wholeness and peace is through the division that naturally happens when we take up the way of the cross.

But, in order to enter into the division, we have to first admit our part in whatever that division may be. This is called confession. As Lutherans, we know that confession is integral to our daily living and to our worship. We know that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves without the power of turning to the one who died a cruel death. We know the sweet absolution as we hear the words “you are forgiven” knowing that each day through the waters of baptism; we die to sin and rise with Christ to share new life. Each day we have a new start.

But, we Lutherans are often so quick to skip to resolution, absolution and reconciliation, often before we have contemplated why we confess. Maybe I'll speak for myself here, but I'd like to avoid all that uncomfortable stuff division and conflict brings. But, if we aren't ever willing to start with ourselves and to work on ourselves and the divisions we encounter, then we will never have peace.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian

during World War II, also an Evangelical Lutheran, must have known this chapter of Matthew quite personally. In the biography of Bonhoeffer by Charles Marsh called *“Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer”*, Marsh reminds us that Bonhoeffer grew up with great pride and loyalty to his native Germany. But as Hitler rose to power, he began to see how the nationalism he felt so keenly could be used for evil purposes. Bonhoeffer recognized, before many others in the German Lutheran Church did, that an enculturated religion, in which nationalism formed the basis of one’s theology, was very dangerous.

That religious nationalism led to the extermination of millions of Jews, blacks, gypsies, and many other ethnic groups who were not of what was called Aryan purity. Exchanging a Jewish Jesus for an Aryan one not only redefined the person of Jesus, but it overturned the message of Jesus. Instead, our Lord Jesus Christ became a tool of oppression.

Bonhoeffer saw how he and the Lutheran Church needed change from within, to take responsibility of their complicit acceptance of the Nazi’s. This is a division that the Lutheran Church needed, so that the Gospel of Peace would be proclaimed. Marsh quotes Bonhoeffer from his journal later known as the *Cost of Discipleship*, where he wrote:

**“The peace of Jesus Christ is the cross. The cross is God’s sword on this earth. It creates division. The son against the father, the daughter against the mother, the household against its head, and all that for the sake of God’s kingdom and its peace – that is the work of Christ on earth! No wonder the word accuses him, who brought the love of God the people, to hatred toward human beings! Who dares to speak about a father’s love and a mother’s love to a son or daughter in such a way, if not either the destroyer of all life or the creator for a new life? . . . God’s love for the people brings the cross and discipleship, but these, in turn means life and resurrection.”**

(Discipleship, p. 197)

We should remember when hearing these words that Bonhoeffer wrote this book in a time of extreme danger to humanity. It is a hard word still and of course, we should value it in its own context and time. Nevertheless, as Bonhoeffer saw in these words of Jesus for us today, it is a Gospel word that is a reminder that discipleship, even though the end desire is to reconciliation, along the way those who embrace the cross will face resistance. They will face opposition. Knowing when the cause is the gospel and not our own personality, of course, will be very important for us to discern.

**“I came not to bring peace, but a sword.”**

Bonhoffer says that the sword Jesus is speaking of is the cross. There upon the cross, the skilled physician opens his wounds for our healing. As followers of the Way, it is at the cross where Christ takes on our cancer, taking the path that is harder than the disease itself to give life. It is there, in his wounds, that we are healed.

May we never take that cost of grace for granted. Amen.