

When Peace is a Sword

Matthew 10:24-29

Slide: Road

I remember the phone call from a beloved family member in January telling me that there was an abnormality on her mammogram. At least, that was the word that was used – abnormality. “They are calling it an abnormality,” she said. And, after the necessary tests, and two biopsies sure enough, that “abnormality” was a tumor, once benign, but now showing a few cancer cells. That didn’t matter. It was still termed cancer.

Then began the process: She met with an oncologist. It was likely stage 0, Thank God, 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 viewed that cancer as a war. She was going to win that war. She desired peace in her body, but first, she had to be wounded to heal. She had to go through the surgery and radiation which were at that time, seemingly worse than the little tumor sitting painless in her body. She chose to go through worse to find wholeness and she was ready and willing to do that. I would, too.

It was considered a necessary surgery. Why would anyone actually say it wasn’t? Otherwise, it would grow. 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, her scans are good, and remission is on the way. 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 were willing to go through the hard way to get there.

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

When I hear these words from our Lord Jesus, it makes me cringe. 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." I said these very words at a funeral this week! 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."

Look. This makes me really feel like, "ugh". This week especially, after officiating at two of our lovely member's funerals, this jarring, difficult, words of separation and conflict makes me quite, well, meh, to use an emoji word. Causing division in families; bringing division instead of peace; Is this what tough love is supposed to look like? And, part of what makes me very squeamish are those who may take this phrase here literally and not metaphorically. Now, when people do that, and they do, I can see how this would be a dangerous word, one that is out of character, one that people have used to divide people, excuse atrocities, and wage religious wars. Who would want to join such a difficult journey of discipleship? It just doesn't fit the Good News of the Gospel!

Or maybe it does. Maybe it takes entering into a necessary surgery, that discipleship means doing the hard work for the entire body to become whole again.

Throughout Christian history, we are surrounded by ordinary people who knew that where the rubber hits the road, when the going gets tough in faith, in the world, and in the church, there are those who stood out for their faith. Think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer who paid the ultimate price against Hitler because of his support for the gospel message of peace. Think about Martin Luther King, who proclaimed a dream for all, promoting a non-violent way. Jesus isn't saying that everyone who follows him will find themselves split off from their families or be in danger. Even Jesus himself was a

troublemaker, who overturned tables and said crazy hard things like “love your neighbor” and “forgive 77 X 7 times”! In these hard sayings from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is saying that there are priorities for the disciple in following him. Why would we always want the easy way and the easy thing? If we had a cancer, we most certainly would open the wound to heal ourselves.

When proclaiming the Gospel OF peace, there are going to be people who don’t like it because it disrupts the status quo. It challenges what we take for granted and it’s quite risky to stick your neck out for the Gospel in any time, including this time. Jesus is speaking about that 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 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 any division to get to a place of peace or justice, 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 with a gaping wound that never heals.

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

Each of us has a part 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. At least from a Lutheran perspective, 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, generally as people, we can also be quick to skip to resolution, absolution and reconciliation, often before we have contemplated why we confess. I mean, who really likes conflict? 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.

In his book called “The Cost of Discipleship”, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor, who was arrested and later killed in Nazi Germany for his struggles against Hitler, compared the cross to the very sword that Jesus speaks of in this reading. The image of the cross as a sword which the Prince of Peace hangs upon is a powerful image and, indeed, Bonhoeffer himself compares it as the necessary wound to which peace is made possible. On p. 197, Bonhoeffer says the following:

“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 world 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.”

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! But, 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 difficulty when they take seriously the healing of the world. They will face opposition to that healing.

“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.

In this deeply divided world, may we, too, take up our crosses, knowing that peace is not the absence of trouble, but it is the presence of God. Amen.