

It Should Be Hard

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC

June 25, 2023

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Scripture Reading Matthew 10:24-39

<sup>24</sup> 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; <sup>25</sup>it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

<sup>26</sup> 'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>27</sup>What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. <sup>28</sup>Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup>Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. <sup>30</sup>And even the hairs of your head are all counted. <sup>31</sup>So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

<sup>32</sup> 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; <sup>33</sup>but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

<sup>34</sup> 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

<sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

<sup>36</sup> and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

<sup>37</sup>Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup>and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup>Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

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Church, here's the headline: it is hard to be a follower of Jesus. Or maybe I'll say, it should be hard to be a follower of Jesus. The work that Jesus calls us to is not always simple, not always easy. Yes, we find comfort and mercy in the loving arms of Jesus - but just as often, we find a challenge.

I might even be so bold to say that when our Christian faith only gives us comfort, when our Christian faith is just easy platitudes, it's incomplete.

Christian faith without effort is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace:  
““Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

And with this morning's text in mind -

I would say that an easy faith is cheap grace.

As Christians we discover again and again how important it is to do the hard work of faith.

In our text, Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Peace is a fascinating word here. So often Bible passages that speak of peace refer to the wholistic idea of peace which is Shalom, and yes, generally when Jesus says peace, Eirene in the Greek, he means it in this wholistic way. But I wonder if here in this specific dialogue, Jesus is speaking of a narrower notion of peace. I pondered a paraphrase with our Bible Study on Tuesday. You might say this is a paraphrase that comes from my personal understanding of the Jesus I follow:

Do not think I have come to bring calm, an absence of conflict, a pleasant family meal, an easy time.

I have not come to bring quiet or serenity.

I will not cry peace, peace - where there is no peace. (Jeremiah 6:14)

I haven't come to do harm, but where harm is being done I won't be silent for the sake of calm.

I have come with a sword, a storm, good trouble, “to cut in order to heal.”<sup>1</sup>

I am committed to liberation and justice,

Luke 4:18-19 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to set free those who are oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

I have come to do the hard work even when it gets uncomfortable.

And, if *you really* want to follow me,

You need to know:

The work is hard,

But the work is good.

The work is important.

If you want to follow me,

You need to know that it might be uncomfortable at Sunday supper.

If you’ve got to choose between a ministry of liberation of the oppressed, and pleasant chit-chat with your brother-in-law,

You’d better let your brother-in-law take care of himself.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2668-what-to-fear>

Who knows. One day he might pick up the cross, too.

Thus concludes the RKGV of this translation.

Osheta Moore says, “Peace is fierce—it has to be, because violence and discord won’t go down without a fight.”<sup>2</sup>

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Folks, let me tell you where this applies to our lives,

today,

in Lexington, in Eastern Massachusetts, in these not-very-United States.

We’re in the midst of a bad trend, folks.<sup>3</sup> There’s been a dramatic increase in hateful rhetoric and actions in the last couple of years, including multiple incidents very close by, within the last few weeks.

As you know, there have been multiple incidents of Antisemitic graffiti, gestures and behavior in the Lexington library and schools as well as the Arlington schools.<sup>4</sup>

As you know, there have been anti-Asian incidents in Lexington.

As you know, there have been multiple acts of graffiti or violence against LGBT+ welcoming churches in Eastern Massachusetts.

Sometimes we wonder if it’s just coincidence. The Anti-Defamation League makes clear it’s not coincidence - it’s a trend.<sup>5</sup>

You also know that as a congregation, Pilgrim is resolute in our rejection of Antisemitism and our commitment to our Jewish siblings. We are resolute in standing with members of the AAPI community. We are resolute in our inclusion of LGBTQIA+

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<sup>2</sup> *Shalom Sistas, Herald Press.*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/hate-bay-state-extremism-antisemitism-massachusetts-2021-2022>

<sup>4</sup> (And likely elsewhere.)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/hate-bay-state-extremism-antisemitism-massachusetts-2021-2022>

members, and our support for our sibling ONA congregations including those recently targeted.

Let me say some things that I firmly believe to be true. Maybe you'll be my Amen corner on these.

Pilgrim Church believes in the equality of all people.

Pilgrim Church respects all religions.

Pilgrim Church is Open and Affirming, not just tolerating, not just welcoming.

Pilgrim Church stands with our neighbors when they are in trouble.

And that's what we are as a congregation, amen?

But I'm asking you today to think about your individual life of faith. This passage is not about the safety of community, this is about the disciples' life of faith when they are sent out into the world to walk in the way of Jesus. So likewise, I'm challenging you to see yourself, individually, walking in the way of Jesus. Not assuming that Pastor Reebee's going to take the lead, not assuming that because we're part of LICA things are covered.

Several Pilgrims (among them - Lesley, Deborah, Steve) have stepped up to be part of the new interfaith working group responding to Antisemitism in Lexington. That's an example of what I mean, and yes there is still time for you to join.

Many Pilgrims have done active bystander training, and I hope you're using that. (They'll be happening again soon.)

I know dozens of Pilgrims showed up years ago when Westboro Baptist came to town, and two years ago when a rightwing hate group showed up at a church in East Lexington. (Be prepared to show up again.)

What could *you* do *now*?

Do your reading - that's usually a good first move. Start with the ADL. There's a footnote in the sermon transcript. But don't spend all your time there.

Check in with impacted folks. Your Jewish neighbor. Your LGBTQIA+ daughter or grandchild.

Write a note of support to the library staff.

Write a note of support to the school staff.

Don't let Antisemitic language, homophobic language, racist language in conversation go unchecked. Call it out. And if someone is hiding behind their version of Christianity, make your faith - your faith which respects Judaism, embraces LGBTQIA+ folks, and proclaims the dignity and equality of all people - make your faith plain.

If you're a parent, a grandparent, a teacher - this is a time to recommit to the values we teach our children. (You can rest assured that in Sunday School and Confirmation this fall, we're going to focus on the values of our faith.)

If you're a student, find the groups working for inclusion and justice in your school and be part of them.

Be an ally, be an upstander, be faithful to what Jesus asked of us.

We are in a moment that calls for moral courage. Don't let oppression, prejudice, hatefulness stand.

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>27</sup>What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.”

Bold proclamation is risky. It's also risky to be someone who stands quietly and calmly and peacefully against hatred or violence. It's risky. It's hard.

And this is serious business. And as wise folks in this church have said to me, it's great that God's got an eye on every sparrow - but in this passage, the sparrows still fall. Jesus is asking us to do the hard work of faith, to be kingdom builders and justice seekers, even when doing so seems to involve picking up a cross. Where is the hope in that? Where could the good news be?

The good news is that there we are called to stand in the breach.

And the good news of the cross is Easter. And there's good news right in this passage. “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” I think that's Jesus' hyperbolic way of saying, when we choose to be brave and to put our neighbors first, and to take up the hard work of faith Jesus has called us to, however risky it is - we will find life.

The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, writing for the UCC, says: “Life requires a full commitment to the kingdom of God, in proclamation and demonstration. Life may only be abundant and full when lived in spirit and truth.”<sup>6</sup>

And the good news, when the world seems filled with injustice, is that trouble doesn't last always.

May it be so.

Amen.

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There is no peace in Southern Africa. There is no peace because there is no justice. There can be no real peace and security until there be first justice enjoyed by all the inhabitants of that beautiful land. The Bible knows nothing about peace without justice, for that would be crying “peace, peace, where there is no peace”. God's Shalom, peace, involves inevitably righteousness, justice, wholeness, fullness of life, participation in decision-making, goodness, laughter, joy, compassion, sharing and reconciliation.

*Nobel Lecture in Oslo, Norway, December 11, 1984.*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-life/>