

Jesus Does Not Let Us Off Easy  
Preacher: Rev. Reebee Girash  
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57:24

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A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington  
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash  
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Text: Matthew 10:24-39

24 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; 25it 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!

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

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

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

35 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;

36 and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

37Whoever 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; 38and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Prayer

Sermon

At the beginning of the pandemic,  
A student of mine called a relative to check in.  
She gave me permission to tell this tale.

The conversation went like this : She was fine, the cousin was fine, the family was fine, the world was a mess. The same conversation many of us had with relatives in March.

Then, she said, the conversation changed. I'm glad I don't have a cruise scheduled, her cousin said. My friend laughed and said, yes, a cruise ship doesn't seem like a good vacation spot right now. He replied, especially not with "all the orientals who take cruises."

Her jaw dropped. She had no idea what to say.

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Jesus does not let us off easy. His proverb from this morning's text comes to mind.  
37Whoever 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..."

The way my student grew up, you don't criticize older family members, you don't court controversy, and you don't call people out.

She thought to herself, just get off the phone, just say, gotta go.

And she thought of friends and church folks of Asian descent.

So she said, listen, that's not okay to say. It's not okay to blame Asian folks for this virus or to stereotype Asian Americans like that.

Then the cousin wanted to get off the phone, suddenly had to go.

They haven't fixed this. She doesn't don't know how to heal the familial relationship.

Jesus was not opposed to families. But perhaps he'd heard this story from one of his close friends: my sister doesn't want me talking about liberation. It's controversial. She doesn't want me including Samaritans at the table. She'd prefer I didn't question tax collectors. She wants me to keep the family dinners light.

Jesus didn't let people off easy.

Jesus prioritized prophecy over politeness, truth over calm, liberation over status quo.

And so he sat with those who were bold enough to be among his first followers, and he said, if you're going to be like me, if you're going to call me your teacher and me your master - not Caesar, not Rome, not a slaveowner, but me -

It won't be easy.

There will be risks, yes, and there will be hard work to do. To follow me, you must be bold, witnesses of truth and liberation.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor, has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Those were not easy words in first century occupied Palestine. When you speak of matters that matter, people push back.

(In the actual service, the following portion was moved to the Children's Message.)

Phillis Wheatley, whose Boston statue you see in the bulletin, was the African woman poet to be published. Seized from Senegal/Gambia at age 7 and enslaved, she nonetheless learned multiple languages and became a self-taught poet. She was a member of Old South Church. In her remembrance of a local pastor, she spoke out against slavery. She aligned herself with abolitionists. She called the church to change its ways regarding slavery. She wrote of slavery:

In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle,

which we call Love of Freedom;

it is impatient of Oppression,

and pants for Deliverance;

and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians

I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us.

This was not easy in 18th century Boston, and she was put on trial.

Prophets don't let us off easy.

The prophets of the Black Lives Matter movement, and prophets of racial justice speaking today, have challenging words that will not let us off easy.

Austin Channing Brown, who writes at the intersection of racial justice, Christianity, and black womanhood, said this week:

"I believe firmly that to practice love is to disrupt the status quo which is masquerading as peace....

We are taught that love is many things, but rarely do we think of love as risky, as disruptive, as noisy, as angry, as causing holy trouble (a phrase I picked up from @sharonirvingmusic). But I am convinced that the pursuit of justice is loving and this kind of love shakes the tables." (via Twitter)

The point I am trying to get across is that Jesus does not let his disciples off easy, Jesus does not let us off easy, and prophets who follow Jesus do not let us off easy.

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

Sometimes "peace" is a synonym for politeness, quietness, status quo. I don't think Jesus would have taken up a literal sword for justice - the Gospels tell us he rejected literal swords more than once. But he was willing to turn the tables over, he was willing to speak a controversial word, willing to risk for justice. And he expected the same of those who would dare call themselves his disciples.

"The powers that be, the death-dealing forces in the world, will not quietly step aside. This is work that will require resolve and perseverance: part-timers need not apply. You've got to go all in, or not go at all.

According to this ideal picture, following Jesus means making God's mission of love and justice the first priority in our lives, even above family and livelihood (Matthew 10:35-37; 10:9-10). It means being willing to confront and conflict with death-dealing powers, so much so that - even though genuine peacemaking remains the ultimate goal - it may well initially appear as though we "have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 5:9; 10:34)." (SALT)

But Jesus also told his disciples this:

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

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I wonder what my student's cousin has been thinking about these last few months. It's hard to be the person whose language is challenged, whose worldview is challenged. It's hard not to feel defensive. I've been there. I've hosted the Thanksgiving dinner when I really wanted everyone to just be nice. I've had one of my favorite Southern phrases called out on Facebook, had its origin dissected and linked to a historic genocide. A mirror has been held in front of my microaggressions.

When we hear words from our sisters, brothers, cousins, nieces, friends, neighbors that call us out, that sound outrageous, that make us uncomfortable, that seem too radical - It's hard not to be defensive.

It's harder still to remember that often, they are doing what Jesus called them to do - To speak boldly, to risk division to throw aside the status quo of injustice, to risk controversy for the sake of liberation, to call each person to account as we work together to overturn systems of injustice and inequality that have held on too long.

"For nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops."

My prayer is that this moment is a transformative time, a tipping point in the struggle against racism in our country. I suspect that prayer is on many of your hearts, too.

If this is our prayer, we must be willing to work hard for racial justice. Jesus does not let us off easy. If this is our prayer, we must be willing to hear the challenge to ourselves, be willing to change.

Have no fear.

Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.

Jesus does not let us off easy, but he walks with us in the work of justice. Amen.