



Sunday June 25, 2023
Matthew 10:24-39 (Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

In case you didn't know it – the Bible has a lot to say about peace. A quick check of 15 translations shows the number of times the word *peace* appears ranges anywhere from 263 to 428 times.

At Jesus's birth, an angelic choir sings "*Peace on earth!*" Numerous times throughout his ministry Jesus offered people words of peace: "*Go in peace and sin no more.*" "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.*" "*God blesses those who work for peace.*" "*I have told you these things, so that in me you might have peace.*"

On Sunday mornings here at Ascension and in many churches around the world, worshippers regularly engage in a practice that follows Jesus's example, "*The peace of the Lord be with you always.*" "*And also with you.*" I think it's safe to assume most of us believe our faith is one of peace-making and peacekeeping.

So, what are we supposed to feel then when we hear Jesus's shocking words in today's Gospel from Matthew which seem to explode off the pages with harsh and provocative language that sounds anything but peaceful? "*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*"

Did Jesus really just say that? A sword, not peace? Because if so, then this sounds menacing and confrontational, and I don't know about you, but I'm having a hard time making sense of our Savior claiming to be on the side of hostility and division, separation and conflict.

We already have race, politics, immigration, nationalism, gun control, abortion, economic status, gender equality, social status, same-sex marriage, education level, and religious affiliation as some of the divisive forces present in our world today. So it seems to me, the *last* thing we need is a gospel that encourages more division.

To makes sense of the words that we hear Jesus speak today, I think we need to take a closer look at the bigger picture, because I just don't think division is the end game for God. And when we dive deeper, what we'll find is Jesus compelling us to move beyond our soft and comfortable faith to wrestle with the hard and high costs of following him. Matthew's Gospel declares in disturbingly honest terms what will happen if we dare to take our faith seriously--and what will happen if we don't.

But I also wonder if there's grace and mercy in the division that Jesus brings. In faith, I have to believe there is. Deep down, I wish that this wasn't the case, and yet Jesus offers us the simple truth that when we stand for what matters most – not everyone will stand with us.

What would happen in our families, our communities, our churches, and our world if we were to live without fear as Jesus suggests and confidently proclaim God's Good News from the housetops? Because the bottom line is, if tender Jesus, meek and mild is what we prefer, then this week's Gospel isn't really for us. If feel-good faith is the comfort zone we refuse to leave, then we're missing out because the peace of God is about so much more than good feelings.

It means that as followers of Jesus we need to be clear and honest about the faith that we claim. And *if* we're being honest, then the truth is we don't always appreciate the truth of the message that Jesus brings. If it doesn't fit with how we want or believe things to be, if the message is challenging to our lifestyle or our comfort, then somehow it's not worth the effort, the sacrifice...or the risk.



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There is absolutely joy in living a faithful life. There is beauty and abundance. There is the promise of love, wholeness, healing, and grace. But a life of faith is also demanding, risky, and will cause us to have to choose one side or the other.

Following Jesus means not only adopting new beliefs but embracing an entirely new way of living. The journey that we're being called into will impact our values, our choices, and most certainly our priorities. And if we're honest and faithful to the leading of the Holy Spirit then we, just like those first disciples, may find ourselves at odds with even those who are most dear to us.

To be a follower of the one who extended radical welcome and acceptance means that we need to do the same by rejecting the temptation to judge and exclude others and instead invite and welcome them into our lives. To be a follower of the one who preached endless and unconditional love and forgiveness means we need to practice the same, particularly when it comes to those who are different from us – in what they believe, in the color of their skin or language they speak, in the culture they celebrate, in the pronouns they claim, in the political party they represent, or in the economic category they fit into.

It's also important to remember that when Jesus speaks of division rather than peace, he's being *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. Jesus doesn't desire to set fathers against sons or mothers against daughters. And it's certainly not his will that we stir up conflict or use his words to justify violence or war.

But his words are a necessary reminder that the peace Jesus offers is not the fake peace of denial or dishonesty. His is a truth-telling peace. The deep, life-changing kind of peace that doesn't hesitate to break or cut in order to mend and heal.

Jesus will name realities that we don't want named. He will upset structures we'd rather keep intact. He will expose the lies that we tell ourselves and others out of fear, laziness, uncertainty, or unwillingness. And he will disrupt every aspect of our relationships with ourselves and each other that keep us from the wholeness that God offers. But not because Jesus wants us to suffer. It's because he knows that real peace is worth fighting for.

When was the last time *your* faith divided you? When was the last time you allowed Jesus to bring you to a point of discomfort? When was the last time your faith encouraged division, change, transformation, in yours or someone else's heart?

My friends, when we hear Jesus' difficult words in this way then we can begin to understand that Jesus is simply describing what's possible. Imagine what it be like if we allowed Jesus to disturb us, to unmake us – to divide us? What would it be like to experience the peace that costs, the peace that breaks, the peace that saves – the peace that passes all understanding? It may be scary, but Jesus also reminds us it's worth it and he will be with us every step of the way. Thanks be to God! Amen.