

Pentecost 3  
Jeremiah 20:7-13  
Romans 6:1b-11  
Matthew 10:24-39

6/21/2020

Sermon by The Rev. Lex Breckinridge

In the almost eleven years I've been with you at St. Thomas, you've heard me preach a lot of sermons. In each one of those sermons I hope it's been clear that the first person I'm preaching to is me. That's right. I hope that I've never said a word to you that I didn't first need to hear myself. One of my great mentors in seminary said to me on more than one occasion, "Watch your pronouns, Breckinridge," meaning that whenever I had the pull to say "you" – like "you should or shouldn't do this or that" – perhaps I really ought to be saying, "I." "I shouldn't do this or that." You see what I mean?

So this morning, I'm going to make explicit what I hope has been implicit in my preaching among you. This morning I'm going to preach a sermon to me. Now I'm sure going to invite you to come along, but I want to make it clear that the first person I'm talking to is me.

So here we go. Our gospel readings last Sunday and today are all about what it means to be Jesus' disciple. About how hard and dangerous true discipleship is. I can't tell you how hard discipleship is going to be for *you* without telling you how hard it is for *me*. And there has never been a more urgent need for true discipleship than in this moment we're living in. It's an apocalyptic moment – remember that the term apocalypse means a revealing, an unveiling.

The pandemic has made visible the fragility of our economy with its huge gaps between the wealthiest and the poorest among us, the racial injustice embedded in our culture that is crying out for healing and reconciliation and the bitterness and rancor and division in our culture that have been with us for too long but which are becoming ever more destructive. This moment really meets the definition of apocalyptic.

So the question I'm putting to myself right now is "How shall I be a follower of Jesus now, today, in this apocalyptic moment?" To address that, I'm going to invite you to join me as I focus on three parts of this morning's text, which, remember, is Jesus talking to his own followers in the midst of their own apocalyptic time about the cost of being his followers.

First, Jesus says, the disciple, meaning the student, needs to be like the teacher. So what does it mean for me to be like Jesus? Well, Jesus lets it be known right quick that he's not here to be a warm and fuzzy do-gooder. "Do not think I've come to bring peace, but a sword," he says. The cost of real peace, true peace, might feel like a sword cutting through some of my conventional wisdom, cutting through some of my assumptions about how to get along in the world. I mean, if Jesus was such an enlightened, affirming guy, shouldn't he have been able to stay out of trouble? Why did people call him such nasty names? Why would being his follower wreck families? And if he was so well thought of, how did he end up on a cross? The answer isn't that his opponents had a lot of strange, unpopular ideas, but that *he* did. It turns out that the Kingdom of God that Jesus was talking about and living out was subversive and controversial. It was going to bring conflict and not phony peace. So being a follower

means seeking the Kingdom of God in a single-minded way and letting go of worrying about the consequences. Gotta just let the chips fall where they may. Will I be able to seek the Kingdom in these times without worrying about the consequences of just letting the chips fall where they may? We'll see, I guess. But that's the way it will have to be if I'm to be a true follower of Jesus.

The second part of the text I need to focus on as I figure out how to be a real follower of Jesus in these days is whether to be afraid or not to be afraid. And the text is a little ambiguous about that. On the one hand, as in so many other places in Scripture, Jesus tells his followers not to be afraid. Be brave, have courage, stand strong. You're worth more than all the sparrows. If I'm going to bring the sword, I'm going to be opposed. So the strength of my convictions needs to be able to withstand intimidation.

On the other hand, I better fear God too. If the words I speak and the actions I take – even if they are nice and kind and uncontroversial – are really words and actions that deny the kingdom, well, that means I lose my advocate before the Father. So, God's claim on my life is a comfort in the face of the dangers that working for the Kingdom brings. But that claim is total. I read something from a biblical scholar recently that really resonates with me. "Proper fear of God always manifests itself in the world of human affairs as fearlessness." So here's a case where fear is actually healthy.

The third piece of the Gospel text that I need to hear is what seems like Jesus' strange antipathy towards families. Not just here but in other places in the Gospels, Jesus speaks as if families get in the way of being a follower. And Jesus is often seen to be in conflict with his own family. Now we should know that the first hearers of the Gospel often faced immense family pressure to reject Jesus. He was, after all, counter-cultural. He seemed to be a dangerous opponent of the established order and the established religion. We can well imagine that the most loving mother or father admonishing their son or daughter not to be led astray by this radical. Undoubtedly, lot so family bridges were burned by Jesus' earliest followers. Now, I'm very fortunate, and I hope you are too, to have an immediate family that approves of me being a follower of Jesus, and who, each in their own way, are also working to be followers of Jesus.

But what other institutional loyalties might get in the way of my being a follower? How can I make sure that the Kingdom of God is my first priority? It's a call for one to examine my attachments. You've heard me quote another old teacher of mine who said, "Tell me the most important thing in your life and I'll tell you who your God is."

Is my family the most important thing in my life? I might have to honestly say "yes." Is that a barrier to me being a fully committed follower? I'm quite sure it is on many occasions. So the work for me is to know that being a fully committed follower actually strengthens the bonds of family and kinship. And to make sure that the bonds of family and kinship don't weaken my commitment to being a follower of Jesus.

So in the days and weeks and months to come, as I live and work in this apocalyptic time, my hope is to live and work fearlessly – fearlessly following Jesus – fearlessly following where the Holy Spirit leads me. And as we work through what has been revealed in this apocalyptic moment, the Spirit is undoubtedly going to lead me into places that are uncomfortable.

You know, the Gospel that Jesus came to proclaim, the Kingdom of God he came to bear witness to, is just as radical and controversial and unsettling in 2020 in the United States of America as it was in occupied Palestine in 30 AD. So as I continue to discern what it means for me to be a follower – that's

going to invite discernment about what it means to be a follower who is also a priest and the Rector of St. Thomas. Which I hope will invite all of us into discernment about what it means for us as a Christian community to follow Jesus in such troubled times. One of our very faithful Vestry members remarked in our last meeting when we began a conversation exploring all of this, "It's complicated." Yes, indeed, it is. Very complicated. Yet, it's also not. We simply must keep ever before us the words of the Prophet Micah, who said: "What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God." It's the work of the Gospel of Jesus – the work of the Kingdom of God. I pray that I – and you and all of us – will be wise enough and fearless enough to begin. To begin the work of justice. To love mercy and kindness with all our hearts. And to always – always – walk humbly before God.