

Sermon for Proper 7A

Text: Matthew 10:24-33

Jesus called his disciples to come and follow him. Jesus told his disciples that the kingdom of heaven was coming, that the kingdom of heaven was very near.

Jesus brought hope and healing to many people. He showed them that he had the power over evil spirits that afflicted them. He had the power to set them free from the illness and injuries that tormented them. He even had the power to raise the dead to life. He had the message that created hope in their hearts. So Jesus brought relief and joy to many people.

The kingdom of heaven was coming. Not just some far away hope. Not a distant fantasy. But when Jesus came, the kingdom of heaven was right there. Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven to earth. He came to bring God's salvation, and that's exactly what he was doing.

He was saving people, saving them from sin and evil, saving them in very real and practical ways from the pain and suffering and despair that sin produces.

Then Jesus told his disciples that they too were to go out with his word, with the good news of the kingdom. He gave them the power and authority to free people from evil spirits that were afflicting them. He gave them the power and authority to heal the sick and free people from disease, even to raise people from death to life. So the disciples realised that they were part of something that was incredibly special. They were just waiting for it to reach a wonderful fulfilment.

Then Jesus surprised them. He did not deny any of the wonderful things he had promised. Yet he turned around and said: *But it is going to be tough. It is going to be dangerous. It is going to be painful.*

Jesus told them something that they would all experience both then, and later as they went out into the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus told them that they would face hatred and persecution. He told them how dangerous the world would be for those who stood for the Gospel of salvation. He told them that he was sending them out like sheep among wolves. They would face dangerous, murderous hatred, and they would be defenceless. Their faith would mean that they were not to fight back. Jesus told them that they would suffer for their faith.

So on the one hand Jesus told his disciples what a wonderful life he was giving them as his people. On the other hand Jesus was telling them how much it would cost them to remain faithful to him.

Matthew chapter 10 is all about being prepared for this challenge, being prepared for suffering for the sake of the faith.

Christians today face the same dilemma. Why are you a Christian? Isn't it because Christian faith promises you a life with God, a life of joy and peace and hope? Isn't that what the kingdom of heaven brings? Isn't that what God's Spirit creates right here among us, here and now?

We live with this wonderful promise. We celebrate our life as God's people. We believe in the grace of God that saves us from sin and evil. We believe that God forgives us our sins. That is why Jesus came. That is why Jesus lived and died.

We believe that God's Spirit gives us a life with God, a life that is ours through the resurrection of Jesus from death to a new life. Those are God's wonderful promises, and wonderful gifts to us.

And yet we still struggle. We get stuck in our own conflicts.

That is perhaps the hardest thing for Christians to understand: If God is so good and so wonderful in his gifts, why do we suffer? Why is life so hard for Christians?

People have often asked the question: *Why do good people suffer?*

Has that been your experience? Have you seen people who you consider good to go through awful suffering? Have you suffered and asked why?

We can sort of answer that question. Who really is good? We like to think of ourselves as good, and we compare ourselves to people we think are bad, much worse than us. But none of us really measure up to God's standard of goodness. And Christians believe that we do not earn God's favour by our goodness. So we cannot use our own goodness to bargain for God's favour.

But I think there is another deeper question: *Why do faithful people suffer?* Our faith is our link to the goodness of God. In faith we live in the mercy of God. That is where we find all these wonderful gifts and promises of God. So if we are faithful followers of Jesus Christ, why should we suffer? And an even more difficult question: *Why do faithful Christians suffer for their faith?* Following Jesus may bring suffering. Standing up for your faith can draw persecution. How does that measure with the promises that Jesus has given us?

Today there are many Christians who are threatened and deprived and persecuted for their faith. There are Christians who are being targeted and killed because they are Christian. Matthew chapter 10 gives some of Jesus' answer when we have questions like this, when we are suffering because of our faith, or when we see Christians persecuted for their faith:

The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! (verses 24-25).

When we think how terribly we might be treated, or how terribly other Christians are treated, then it is important for us to remember who we are following, and remember how Jesus was treated. Jesus was denounced as Beelzebul, an ancient name for the devil. When he was doing good and speaking truth, his enemies twisted his words, and accused him of the worst evil.

Christians have often been accused of evil, because they will not accept human rules that want to control people's faith. They have been treated as criminals, when their only crime is refusing to honour corrupt governments and powers.

But Jesus has already warned that this will happen. Jesus is the teacher. We are the disciples, or followers. Can we expect to be treated better than our teacher? Jesus is the master. We are his servants. Can we expect to be treated better than our master? Jesus came to confront every human lie and every spiritual evil. But this meant that the powers of evil turned and attacked him. When we follow Jesus, we follow Jesus into the same battle. Therefore, we should not be surprised if we too are attacked, and if we too suffer.

Being faithful does not mean that we will escape pain and suffering. Being faithful does mean that we are with Christ and Christ is with us when we are persecuted. But Jesus said:

So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the rooftops (verses 26-27).

Fear is a weapon. People have always exploited fear. If I can make you afraid of me, then I can control you with threats and pain. It is the weapon of terrorists, and of dictators, and of every bully.

Jesus says: "Do not be afraid of people like that"—don't let them control and manipulate you, even if they threaten you. Jesus faced his enemies, and I cannot think of any time he showed fear. He knew the danger, and he predicted his fate. But that did not control him.

Rather he had a much stronger motivation. He was compelled by his commitment to the truth of God's love and salvation. Now he encourages his followers to live and act with that same conviction.

You do not have to hide. Rather be bold, be brave. Never be ashamed of who you are and what you stand for. Be open about your faith. Don't think you have to tell people what they want to hear. Tell them the truth that God has given you. Do so openly in the daylight. Do so loudly, from the rooftops, in public, in front of people.

For you know that in the end it is God who has spoken the truth, and you are speaking that truth. That is what will be revealed. When you speak that truth, you will be vindicated.

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (verses 28-31).

Again, do not be afraid. We so easily become preoccupied with our physical welfare. We want to have a life that is free of pain and suffering.

Jesus tells us that there is something much more important than our physical welfare, and that is our spiritual welfare. There is a much greater danger than physical persecution, and that is spiritual damnation.

Jesus tells us that the enemies who threaten us cannot take away the life and salvation that Christ gives to us. If we know that, that is our strength against pain and threat. That is the strength to accept suffering rather than being manipulated by fear.

When we think that we are forgotten, abandoned in our suffering, he compares us to the sparrows. Every little sparrow fluttering around is known by God, and God cares whenever a little bird suffers or dies. God does care when we suffer. God does care about our life.

When we feel that we have been forgotten, and that God does not notice what is happening to us, he assures us he knows all about us. He counts the hairs on your head, and values every single one of them. He says: "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven" (verses 32-33).

We see what people do here and how Christians are treated here on earth. Jesus tells us of something that we do not see, but that we hold in faith.

Jesus tells us how he stands for us before our heavenly Father. He calls us to be faithful and to stand for our faith, even when it means rejection, suffering or threat. He promises to faithful to his promises.

And he warns us that when we give up our faith, we are giving up much more. We give up our right to stand before our God.

Our faith is a precious gift from the Spirit of God. With faith we follow Jesus Christ. With faith we are not controlled by any human power, or any evil power. With faith we are not manipulated by fear and danger.

Why should faithful Christians suffer for their faith? It is so hard for us to understand, when we are suffering. Or when we see others suffering terrible treatment.

Jesus' answer: he does know, he does understand, and he gives the power to overcome fear. He helps to put all of our sufferings in the perspective of his love and grace that lasts forever. No one can take that from us! Amen.