

Proper 7 A  
Matthew 10:24-39  
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*Awkward Aphorisms of Jesus*  
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*'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; 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!*

*'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 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. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your God. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

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

*'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. 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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'*

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Our text from Matthew's gospel really does feel a bit like a ramshackle list of awkward aphorisms, of disparate Jesus sayings – many of which I almost wish the millennia had forgotten instead of immortalizing them in Matthew's gospel, as has been done. While many of us may find comfort in the thought that if “God's eye is on the sparrow, I know she watches me,” most of this text is rather more uncomfortable – more cringy. I find precious little reprieve for my spirit in words like: “a disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master,” or “fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell,” or “whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my God in heaven,” or “those who lose their life for my sake will find it,” or, perhaps the worst, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword . . . to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother.” I'm guessing it's no accident that this text was avoided last week on Father's Day!

My job as preacher will never be to make the difficult words of scripture easier. It will never be to reframe the unpalatable words of Jesus into something easily digested, reposted, and liked on social media. It will never be to dumb down or dress up the tough stuff our tradition has handed down to us. I respect you too much for that. However, my job *is* to help it make sense – to frame the call it issues to us and the good news it holds for us. Admittedly, this particular text issues more of a call than a proclamation of good news, but it's not quite as grim as it might appear at a first glance. For the interpreter of scripture, context is queen.

These verses follow on the coattails of last week's, when Jesus prepared to send his disciples on their first solo missions. Jesus gave them explicit instructions to take the good news to their fellow Hebrews, curing sick people, raising the dead, cleansing those effected by leprosy, and casting out demons. He went on to tell them about the risks involved in their mission. Today's reading is a continuation of that.

He warns the disciples that if people are calling him a devil, the disciples should expect the same treatment. But even as they undergo such persecutions, they should remain strong in their proclamation. Jesus then admits that his message is bound to bring contention. That's not his goal, but when you preach the kind of radical reversal that Jesus did – the toppling of the status quo, the humbling of the powerful and wealthy and “holy,” and the elevation of the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised masses – it was bound to ruffle some feathers. The disciples should be prepared. But he assures them that the message is worth it – all of it – because the new world that the message promises to bring about will be worth it.

Jesus wasn't wrong, was he? The disciples did suffer, didn't they? All of them, with the exception of John, died as martyrs to the cause. Throughout history, many of those who have taken up Jesus' message with passion, conviction, and action have met similar fates – even at the hands of the church founded in Jesus' name. There's just something about siding with Jesus that seems to paint a target on people's backs. Actually, I'll be more specific: there's something about siding with the Jesus of the gospels – the champion of the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised masses; the toppler of status quo; the enemy of empire; the visionary and revolutionary Jesus – that seems to paint a target on people's backs. The Jesus of many forms of Christianity just doesn't seem like enough of a threat to do that.

The Jesus of individual salvation, spiritual freedom, heavenly reward, and personal piety doesn't present much of a real threat to the powers of empire, economics, and status quo. Too often, this Jesus is little more than an opiate for the masses, an “illusory happiness,” as Karl Marx once said. And this Jesus' message is too often hyper individualistic, spiritual, and void of any quantifiable improvement in the human condition. This message is not a threat to the powers that be. This Jesus is not a threat to

the powers that be. This is not my Jesus. And I don't think it's yours either. That's one of the things that drew me to New England Church. This is not a congregation of folks looking for an illusory happiness or an opiate Jesus. You're a thinking church, on a search for truth, willing to take action, even if it ruffles some feathers. Here's a case in point.

Last week I received a phone call from someone who described themselves as a life-long churchgoer, though not at New England. They'd become aware of our Pride Celebration Sunday service and were disgusted that sexual orientation or gender identity would have any place in a church. They compared our actions to those taken recently by Budweiser in their commercial featuring a trans woman or Target carrying Pride-related merchandise and said that we were indoctrinating our congregation. With a few expletives thrown in, they concluded by telling me that talking about gay people in church is wrong, so stop doing it, please.

Jesus knew that his message about the realm of heaven would ruffle some feathers. He had been called a devil and his disciples should expect nothing different. When you preach the kind of radical reversal that Jesus did, the toppling of the status quo, the humbling of the powerful and wealthy and "holy," and the elevation of the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised masses, one shouldn't be surprised. I'm guessing, you aren't. And neither should you be deterred. Because if the good news of the realm of heaven isn't good news for the closeted gay teen or the transitioning woman or the child with two moms, then it isn't good news for any of the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised masses Jesus made it his mission to serve. And if they have no place in church, then the church is little more than another instrument of status quo, empire, and patriarchy. If they have no place in church, then church has no place in the world.

Thank God for places like New England Congregational Church and thank God for people like you. You remind me that the church still has a place in this world, a voice worth listening too, a mission worth joining, a Jesus worth following. You remind me that the good news of Jesus is still just as relevant and just as necessary as it was 2,000 years ago and it's still just as likely to ruffle feathers. In fact, maybe if we're not ruffling feathers, what we're offering isn't Jesus' good news – it's just illusory happiness and an opiate Jesus.

Today it makes sense that earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus said, "*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*" It almost sounds like Jesus is blessing the feather-rufflers like us. I, for one, do feel blessed. Thanks be to God. Amen.