

“Fear and Faith”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – June 25, 2023

Please read:
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

One of the most important and foundational questions we might reflect on around today’s texts is simply, “What is worth wanting?” It’s a different question than what are your passions and goals, right? It’s about reflecting more deeply on why you even have your passions and goals, and are they really worth pursuing? It’s a deceptively simple question, but important before we dive into today’s texts, because on this balmy first Sunday of summer, Jesus and the Apostle Paul invite us in different ways to dive into the deeper waters of how we are living our lives.

We are not talking about success or failure here. We’re talking about the *metrics* of success or failure. What’s *the measure* to evaluate whether you are living a life worth living, and why?

Take for example, Albert Speer. He was an intelligent young man and brilliant architect. Adolph Hitler offered him the role of chief architect for the Nazis, and Speer said yes and achieved a certain greatness because he said, he was “above all an architect.” Speer’s singular devotion to architecture made him an exceptionally good architect. But paradoxically his greatness in architecture made him a monstrously bad human being. The point is, it’s possible to achieve success in our highest aspirations and yet fail miserably as human beings.¹

I think it is important, as we approach the gospel text, to consider Jesus’ teachings in the larger context of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus has just called and sent his disciples out. For the first time, Jesus mentions *the way of the cross*. I think here Jesus is warning his followers that to “take up the cross and follow” him will be costly. The way of self-emptying love, forgiveness and mercy involves sacrifice. It’s a teaching for those who would be *disciples* of Jesus, those who have been met and called by him to *follow in his way*... Now what is missed on too many of us is the simple fact that the good news of the Gospel is for everyone — *discipleship is not*.

Let me repeat that for you... *The good news of the Gospel is for everyone — but discipleship is not*. This may be counterintuitive for many Christians today. Isn’t the whole point of Christianity that anyone can become a disciple, and that the goal is to make as many followers of Jesus as possible? That may have been Paul’s

¹ Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living* (Penguin Random House, 2023), xxvi-xxvii.

motivation, but if that was Jesus' goal, he had a strange way of going about it. Jesus encountered thousands of people during his ministry — but only called 12 to be disciples. He sent them out not to make more converts but to heal and liberate and proclaim “the kingdom of God has come near” (Matthew 10:1,7-8). Jesus and his followers moved around feeding, healing, and teaching the crowds, but not signing them up as disciples. To the vast majority of people whom he encountered, Jesus did not say, “Follow me,” but rather: “Your faith has made you well,” or “Return home and declare what God has done for you,” or “Go on your way, and sin no more,” or “Go in peace.” You could argue that while Jesus came to save the world, he only calls a few disciples.

Barbara Brown Taylor once argued that, if we're honest, most of us are more like “friends of the disciples” rather than actual disciples ourselves. God raises up genuine disciples in every generation: the high-impact saints and countless others whose names we may or may not ever know, who actually gave their lives to God's mission of love and justice above the life goals and achievements to which most of us dedicate our lives. And so, for Taylor anyway, we're “friends of the disciples” — and like friends, we may extol and support disciples where we can; and like friends, we may be inspired (or haunted, or driven) to follow their examples here and there, in fragments or moments or chapters of our lives.²

Which brings us to the teachings in our text... Did you notice that in our Gospel text today Jesus said in one way or another “Do not be afraid” three times (*Matt. 10:26, 28, 31*)? I think Jesus understood that even as friends, if not hero disciples of Jesus, we all go through times when we are afraid that God has forgotten us. “Just as God cares for the sparrows, even more God cares for us,” is Jesus' logic. We can find shelter with God. But Jesus is also well aware that as soon as we start to embody God's love through acts of kindness and compassion, through forgiveness and mercy, we will face conflict, both within and without... And it's when we face conflict that we discover what our core beliefs really are. Jesus went about proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and this created conflict with the religious and political authorities. “A disciple is not above the teacher...” Jesus teaches. He had conflict, and so will anyone who chooses to follow him. Ironically, it was the religious leaders who accused Jesus of being Beelzebul, head of the demons, so of course they also will attack Jesus' followers.

² Referenced online Thursday, June 22, 2023: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/6/17/what-troubles-you-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-third-week-after-pentecost>

Does this sound theoretical to us in the quiet first days of summer here in New Canaan? I would remind you of the plight of Christians in India, Nigeria, China, or various Middle-eastern countries. According to Vatican News, over 360 million Christians face persecution today.³ I mentioned a few weeks ago the Chinese missionary I met at Princeton during my alumni reunion. She made it clear that under the current president of China, Xi Jinping, Christians are having as hard a time as they ever had. When I asked how we might support the church in China, she said, *don't pray for no persecution; that is how the church will grow in China. Pray we are faithful in the midst of suffering.* Faith must conquer fear.

There is a twist here... It's called "the fear of the Lord." You've probably heard the Proverb (9:10, etc.), "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord..." Barbara Taylor Brown explains the biblical writers mean "fear of God's pure being, so far beyond human imagining that trying to look into it would be like trying to look into the sun."⁴ Fear in the context of faith is awe and reverence. The paradox is that as we learn to "fear the Lord," *we are set free from all other fears.* Faith is power for liberated life. It puts all other fears in their place, and frees us up to live a new life, liberated from our fears and insecurities!

Did you catch what Paul said in our Romans text: That if we have died with Christ, "we believe that we will also live with him?" We are no longer alone! We have the resurrection hope of the Creator of the universe, and are free to forgive, to let go, to serve, to love, no matter what the cost...

As followers of Jesus, we are to be agents of change through not love of power but the power of love. It's about the love for all people that brings resistance and conflict. When Jesus says to his disciples, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword..." and then lists all of the conflicts that come up between even family members because of faith, it doesn't mean that we are to be *causing* conflict. Quite the opposite. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus made it very clear, "Blessed are the peacemakers!" According to Paul, we have been given the "ministry of reconciliation!" But as we show the love of Christ, as we forgive those who hurt us, as we turn the other cheek, as we do not return evil for evil, as we speak the truth in love and proclaim that goodness of God's grace for all people, as we live in the freedom of Christ, this "witness" will have a subversive effect on the power dynamics around us!

³ Referenced online Thursday, June 22, 2023: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-01/over-360-million-christians-suffering-persecution-in-the-world.html>

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 47.

I just had a great visit with our oldest son in Nashville. We enjoyed some great meals, bluegrass at the Ryman Auditorium, a Listening Room Session with some country singers, and yesterday enjoyed the Pride Celebration in Bicentennial Park where there were live bands. We sat on the grass and a group of pretty wild Lesbians sat down next to us – We're talking full body tattoos, fishnet stockings, nose rings, purple hair and glitter... They'd been drinking and so easily started a conversation, and when they found out I was there to visit Danny for Father's Day, they all said how their parents would never come visit them. I was reminded how so many people in the world only know love when they are living up to somebody else's expectations or conforming to worldly norms and stereotypes.

The gospel is about God's unconditional love. The fullness of God's love was revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And as we follow this way of self-giving love, it's going to mean our lives and relationships are going to look different. We will walk in newness of life. We are free from conforming to the standards of this world. We live to please God and the glory of self-giving love.

Finally, when Jesus says that if you love your father or mother, or son or daughter more than him, you are not worthy of him, or if we do not take up our cross and follow we are not worthy of him, I think it needs to be said that none of his disciples were worthy of him. They all abandoned him. Remember what we say at the table: We do not come because we are worthy, but because he is worthy...! Perhaps we need to reflect on what fears are keeping us from recognizing his beauty, goodness and truth. And perhaps we need to reflect more deeply on our own discipleship and ask, "What do I have to lose in my life so that I will be found in Christ?" or put another way, "From what fears do I need to be set free to live the new life God promises for me and others around me, especially those who are really different from me?"

Is this even a life worth wanting? If so, I invite you to embrace the faith that will set you free from your fears to be the person God has created and called you to be, following the way of the cross, living in the freedom and joy of God's love.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.