

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8) July 2

What is a disciple of Christ? Today as we hear these readings, we are given to consider just what disciples are. Two weeks ago we heard that Jesus has sent his disciples out into the world to make more of them. But what exactly are we making? What is discipleship? The collect of the day has the two essential elements of discipleship wrapped up in its request. A disciple listens to the master and follows him. We sit at his feet when he sits down to speak. When he gets up to go to another place, we go with him. Disciples listen to Jesus, they hear the Word proclaimed, they read their Bibles, they talk about what he said, and they hunger for more. This always should happen at Church, it should also happen in other places in our lives as well. This is the whole point of the Sabbath law in the Old Testament. It is not that we stop working but that we shut off all the machines and devices, the toil and the pressing responsibilities for a few minutes and listen to what God has to say.

Disciples also follow Jesus. They walk in the path that he has blazed by his own life among us. The hungry still need feeding, the poor and helpless still need his attention. The sick are still longing for the comfort of a friend and the sinners are still in need of forgiving. Jesus may not have given me the power to rebuke a fever and heal a person with just a word as he did, but he has given me the same love that can sit at the bedside of a sick friend, hold their hand, say a prayer, get a drink of cool water and perhaps an aspirin if that is appropriate. Our lives are given to follow his.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the life of forgiveness which we may follow. This is, I believe, the great temptation to which the North American church has succumbed. We talk a great deal about forgiveness, but we don't really do that much of it. Partially this is because we have decided that since Jesus was nice we are supposed to be nice too. That keeps us from honestly facing and confronting sin. But this is not niceness. This is fundamentally a self-deception. We are unwilling to confront the ugly divorce in our midst because we know that if we do, our own sins might be judged as well. We would rather not talk about it at all. We are afraid that if we do bring it up, the person might simply leave our congregation and then we would have lost another person. So we say nothing. In effect we play church. We don't really follow Jesus in this, we don't truly listen to what he says, we force him to affirm what we are. Not that he really does that, mind you. We cannot tame him, but we imagine that we have.

There is a terrible logic that plays out here. When we say nothing about the sin, we can then say nothing about the forgiveness either. Jesus never said that sin was "OK" or that it did not matter. It mattered a great deal to him, so much that he went to the cross to deal with it. He rose from the dead because he wanted to give us a different life. The sinners who gathered at his feet and caused such an offence to the churchly types of his day were there to be forgiven. We think that if we gather a few sinners together we have done the Jesus thing, but afraid that we cannot talk about their sin, we seek to lure them in with the right music, or the youth program, or the promise of something exciting or valuable to them. But this is a self-deception and deceptive on our part. They are not there for the stuff, and if they are I would contend they are not really

there. That fellowship is just too shallow to stand. The first offence, the first cross word, and they will be out of there. Conversely, forgiveness is a really powerful force in people's lives. If they are there for forgiveness, we can be singing long hymns, off-key, and in Latin, and I bet they will still be there.

How does this take place in 21st century America? I know the arguments that say we need to do all these things to lure them in so we can forgive them, but that sounds incredibly deceptive to me. It sounds like Madison Avenue at its worst. It is a bait and switch tactic. I don't want to be that. That does not sound like Jesus at all.

I believe that this starts by demanding that the things we do be forgiveness events and if we cannot see them as forgiveness events, we stop doing them. Now, please understand me, the Biblical definition of sin and hence the biblical definition of forgiveness is much broader than our definition, so we will have to incorporate a number of other metaphors for this. Reading Leviticus 12ff we learn that sin offerings were made for all sorts of things that were not moral. And when we see Jesus in ministry, we see him caring for all sorts and conditions of men. Everything that is not the way God intended it to be in the creation is "sin" as the Bible sees. And that means Jesus has died to remedy every evil. He will wipe away every tear. So to call something forgiveness does not mean that we are reduced to just that language or even just the moral dimension. That is another great temptation which has been foisted upon us and to which too many of us have succumbed as if the church is only about "spiritual" things but science and government, education and the rest are about "real" things. Jesus was very "real" in the way he expressed forgiveness. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, befriended the lonely, and John the Baptist called it all the work of the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world.

An interesting discipleship illustration I heard the other day, from a source I am unable at the moment to cite properly. Someone quoted it from a book and I was not quick enough with my pen to write it down. One of the brothers on Tuesday, however, connected me to a link that helps out: <http://mikehowerton.blogspot.com/2012/05/rock-parable.html>

One day Jesus asked his disciples to pick a stone and carry it for him. Peter, having been impetuous a few times before, picked up a nice, palm sized stone and walked along with it. When it was time to eat lunch, Jesus told them to look at their stone, it had turned to bread. It was their lunch.

After lunch Jesus again asked the disciples to pick up a stone for him and carry it. Peter, still a little hungry after what amounted to a dinner roll lunch, picked up a rather large stone and struggled under its weight for the whole afternoon.

Toward evening, when it was getting close to supper time, Jesus and his disciples came to a creek. Jesus told his disciples to cast their stones into the water. Peter, expecting a full loaf of whole grain out of the deal was spluttering and objection. Jesus asked him, "Did you listen to what I said?" and "For whom were you carrying the stone?" We often serve ourselves in the

name of Jesus. We frequently impose on Christ's message and invitation to us something which he has not promised nor expected.

Discipleship is not an easy thing to sort out in every situation and our own human nature is often rebellious against the very essence of discipleship. Thanks be to God he has given us a new heart.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, by the working of Your Holy Spirit, grant that we may gladly hear Your Word proclaimed among us and follow its directing; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God has power we say in this prayer, lots of power, in fact he has it all. We beseech this powerful God, by the gentle working of his Holy Spirit to do something for us. Notice, we don't want him to just to use the power to do it, we want it done by the Spirit? There is a very good reason for that. When the power of God is evidenced we cannot but say yes to it. This prayer is preserving for us the ability to say "no" and that makes the yes meaningful. The Spirit is resistible.

We want this Spirit working in our lives to give us to "gladly hear God's Word proclaimed" and then to actually do it, "follow its directing." Sometimes it is hard to hear God's Word. It isn't all nice and sweet. We don't really like to hear it call us out for our sins. Of course, sometime, we get so fixated on the law that we live in a perpetual lent. The result is we are so fixated on the fact that we don't like the law that we imagine that we have to keep saying the Law until people like it. But we proclaim the Law as an instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel. We all want the Hallmark version of the Gospel, sappy and sweet. But the real Gospel empowers change and new life.

For Lutherans this has to be a bit of a "get off your butts and start living" sort of a prayer. There are many who could do with a much stronger dose of hearing the Word of God. But Lutherans have got the hearing part down, at least the part about sitting there while someone talks about the Word of God. But what they don't have is the get up and actually doing it part. Too many of us are spiritual gluttons of a sort. We sit at the trough of God's Word but don't realize that the Word we consume is for a purpose; that we would then be about the Father's business, that we would be the active and engaged disciples Jesus calls us to be. Remember, these words of Jesus in the Gospel lesson today are part of his commission to the disciples to go out and be missionaries. They are not just words to think about and ponder, but they are words which were to be done.

And this is what the Tempter is aware of better than we are aware. He hates it when people listen to God and then put that word into practice in their lives. And so he seeks to disrupt this in any way he can. He will tell us that the word is boring, it is irrelevant, it is suspect, it is baseless superstition, it is but one of many paths to know God so sample a few others, etc.

If he cannot keep us from the Word, then he works on the connection between the word and life, because if he can just keep us listening but not doing, that is almost better than a person who does not listen at all. The pharisaical Christian who solemnly nods an assent to what the preacher says but never actually forgives another person must simply taste better when the Devil devours them. But he also realizes that they are helpful to his plan. Now he can use them as an illustration to others that the Word of God really is worthless, so why bother listening to it.

And if he cannot keep us from trying to put this word into practice in our lives, then he will turn our very strength into our downfall. We will become proud of what we have done and the good work will become the biggest sin of all. The Devil will portray us as smug hypocrites, and for his purposes, so much the better if the portrayal is honest.

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves why we and the people to whom we preach are there this morning. What do we expect to happen in this service? It appears from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that many early Christians seem to have thought that Jesus would come back on a Sunday. They prayed at their services "Maranatha!" and expected that one of these Sundays, Jesus would answer that prayer. It might have lent a certain sense of urgency to their worship and their attendance. After all, if this was the Sunday, you would not want to be the guy who went fishing instead of going to Church.

What do our folks expect when they come to worship? My guess is that they do not expect much.

Some are there out of a sense of duty. For them, church is the service they bring to God.

Some are there because they have had a close encounter with God – they are looking for what God has to say to them today.

Others are there in much the same we come to dinner. I may not expect this particular meal to be something that transforms my life, but it will nourish me this week for the service which I render.

Many of those to whom we preach have such an ingrained sense of Lutheran humility which expects little because we are just not that important.

Readings

Jeremiah 28:5-9 Our text is really part of a whole chapter which has an interesting story to tell. I have included the surrounding verses for us to consider. The scene seems to be the temple of the Lord. Jeremiah has shown up wearing a yoke, a symbol of servitude and a sign act predicting the Babylonian conquest and "yoking" of the people in slavery.

In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, Hananiah the son of Azzur, the prophet from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the LORD, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, ² "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. ³ Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD's house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of

Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. ⁴ I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, declares the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.”

⁵ Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Hananiah the prophet in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD, ⁶ and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD make the words that you have prophesied come true, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.

⁷ Yet hear now this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. ⁸ The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹ As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”

¹⁰ Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke-bars from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke them. ¹¹ And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, “Thus says the LORD: Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years.” But Jeremiah the prophet went his way.

¹² Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke-bars from off the neck of Jeremiah the prophet, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ¹³ “Go, tell Hananiah, ‘Thus says the LORD: You have broken wooden bars, but you have made in their place bars of iron. ¹⁴ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put upon the neck of all these nations an iron yoke to serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they shall serve him, for I have given to him even the beasts of the field.’” ¹⁵ And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, “Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. ¹⁶ Therefore thus says the LORD: ‘Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the LORD.’”

¹⁷ In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.

If I were attracted to this text, I might preach Jesus as the prophet of a peace, no, not the peace of human understanding. The gospel disabuses us of that notion. But this is the peace that surpasses human understanding, which keeps us in Christ. This peace is not located in the family, in the security, or the things of humanly understood peace. This is the peace which is the life transformed by Christ.

In this approach, Hananiah is urging a worldly peace, the peace the Jesus has in his sights in the Gospel reading. Jeremiah is actually offering a real peace to the folks in Jerusalem. It does not tickle their ears, it comes through a cross of exile and suffering. But Jeremiah himself will proclaim a real peace to the exiles. That prophecy of peace does get fulfilled in Christ who is our peace.

This sermon could start by launching off the words of Jeremiah. The prophet who proclaims peace is only a valid prophet when the peace comes true. You proclaim that in your hearing these words, in your baptism and faith; that peace from God has come to you. Jeremiah's rule has been applied and the peace of God has come in Jesus.

The prophet Jeremiah had a very difficult job to do. As we noted last week, he had a miserable and unpopular message to deliver. The Babylonians were coming and they would destroy the kingdom of Judah, slay many, and force a remnant off into slavery and exile. His prophetic ministry apparently was not without some serious opposition either. Just what it took to be a prophet in ancient Israel is not entirely clear to us. This prophet Hananiah never wrote a book, we have no idea of what his call might have been like. For that matter, we often get little more than simply "The Word of the LORD came to..." for the prophets who are in the Bible. Did they have a seminary? Was there a license to prophesy? Did you have to pass a theological interview? Was there some equivalent of the roster in ancient Israel? Gasp! Did they preach without ordination? Did you know you were really a prophet when you were enrolled in the health plan and were accumulating months of service toward a retirement pension?

Jeremiah was a prophet, he knows that because he is prophesying the usual gloom and doom message of his predecessors. The people have strayed far from the covenant and God is digging deeply into the provisions of that covenant to bring them back. It said that if they persisted in "whoring" after other gods, he would send an enemy to oppress them and cart them away from the land, one of the three elements of the promise made to Abraham. He would slay many of their sons and daughters, the second element of the promise to Abraham. It was Jeremiah's job to tell the people that the Babylonians were that enemy.

But God had made other promises and done some things in the past which gave Hananiah a leg to stand on too. He had said that his temple was a holy place where his name dwelt, that the son of David would rule on that throne forever (II Sam. 7). He had delivered Jerusalem from great foes in the days of Hezekiah when Sennacherib had surrounded the city. That night the angel of the LORD had slain 185,000 of them and Sennacherib and his army fled north. So Hananiah is also basing his message on the promises and past actions of God.

Who is right? Jeremiah gives us the unhelpful criteria of hindsight. The correct one is the one whose prophecy comes true. That really doesn't help us out when the decision is upon us to act as one or the other says. The people of Jeremiah's day were saying "The Temple, the Temple, the Temple" and basing their hope on that. They would contradict Jeremiah's advice/prophesy and engage in a second tax revolt against Nebuchadnezzar and he would come in frustration and level the city, tearing down its walls, destroying its gates, pulling down the temple. It is this destruction that Ezra and Nehemiah try to rectify after the exile is ended.

At least we are above that today. We base our confidence upon much more solid ground as we shout out, "Luther, Luther, Luther" or "Confessions, Confessions, Confessions." Or perhaps on a more local scale we remember our glory days when the building was full of young families and

we shout the name of the institution “Trinity, Trinity, Trinity” or “Grace, Grace, Grace.” Does God really care about that? Confessions and Congregations don’t exist for themselves.

The message of Jeremiah is that God doesn’t give a fig for his only temple in all the world if the people who enter its doors don’t do so in faithful love of him. If they are not bringing their deepest and most profound problems to him for solutions, the building be damned! And he is willing to do that. The institution, the buildings, the stuff, it is all about the people and their relationship to God. When we forget that essential truth, the stuff might all just evaporate. Will we evaporate with it? Only a remnant of Judah would be saved. Will the Lutherans of North America survive only as a remnant? Will they remember to listen to God and value what he values? Will only the ELS be left? ☺

The Gospel lesson today can be read as a warning against idolatry. Have our congregations themselves, founded to proclaim Christ, become our idols? If they have, what is the preacher to do? Jeremiah was nearly killed for his message.

Psalm 119:153-160

Resh

- ¹⁵³ Look on my affliction and deliver me,
for I do not forget your law.
- ¹⁵⁴ Plead my cause and redeem me;
give me life according to your promise!
- ¹⁵⁵ Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek your statutes.
- ¹⁵⁶ Great is your mercy, O LORD;
give me life according to your rules.
- ¹⁵⁷ Many are my persecutors and my adversaries,
but I do not swerve from your testimonies.
- ¹⁵⁸ I look at the faithless with disgust,
because they do not keep your commands.
- ¹⁵⁹ Consider how I love your precepts!
Give me life according to your steadfast love.
- ¹⁶⁰ The sum of your word is truth,
and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.

Psalm 119 is an acrostic psalm, each section begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This begins with the letter “resh” hence the ascription above the psalm. Resh is roughly equivalent to the English letter “r.” It even looks like; although, because Hebrew is written from right to left, the symbol is backward.

Every verse in Psalm 119’s 175 verses, the longest chapter of the Bible, has the word Law or some synonym of Law, such as command, statute, testimonies, or word. The psalmist expresses

his deep and abiding love of God's Law. In this section of the psalm, the psalmist notes that he will love this law, even when it meets with opposition. Clearly a reference to Jeremiah's plight but also the Gospel's admonitions to the disciples. He prays for God to give him life, not as a reward, but out of God's steadfast love.

Romans 7:1-13

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? ²For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.

³Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

⁴Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. ⁵For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

⁷What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." ⁸But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. ⁹I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. ¹⁰The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. ¹²So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

¹³Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

There is a lot going on in this text so perhaps a little outline is helpful.

- 1. Continuing from last week, the first verses of this text involve the answer of Paul to his second question as part of the diatribe. In 6:15 Paul had imagined someone wondering about the effect of grace. Paul's imagined interlocutor wondered if we should just go ahead and sin because we are no longer under the law but grace and presumably our sins no longer count against us. Paul emphatically says that our deeds do matter. Vss 1-6 are the second part of Paul's response. He is arguing against the idea that God's grace has rendered our lives morally sterile, without import.*
- 2. In vss. 7-12 Paul asks another question, is the Law then a bad thing, sin itself? Again, the answer is "by no means!" The law itself is good but its effect on me is not to engender*

and produce righteousness, but to magnify the terror of sin. Without the law to point out the sinfulness of my life, I would be oblivious to it.

- 3. Vs. 13 begins another question, if the Law is good, how is it that something good kills me? Again, emphatically stated, Paul rejects that notion and asserts that the Law is good but sin produces the death. The Law shows the sin, diagnoses it, puts it into stark and dreadful relief so that the sin might be shown for what it is.*

Did you ever wonder what it was like to be inspired by God to write a book? Do you suppose Paul had the sense that he was inspired? Do you wonder if Paul ever regretted writing something which ended up in one of these letters? He does speak of a “harsh letter” written to the Corinthians, but that is most likely lost to us.

Paul uses an illustration here that doesn't seem to work too well. Is that our failure to understand or is it a quirk of Paul the letter writer? The logic of the whole marriage thing is a little odd at best. Perhaps it sounded better for the first century folks who would have first read this. The problem is that the widow is freed from the law because her husband died. That part makes sense, but when you apply it to the topic at hand, it gets a fuzzy. In the Christian faith Jesus died to free us from the law. The law did not die, nor were we particularly married to it. Death as a liberating mechanism from the law is about as far as you want to take this one.

The big point that Paul wants to make, however, seems fairly clear, even if the illustration doesn't really help us along toward the conclusion very much. The death of Christ on the cross has radically changed me and the way that I interact with the world. The Law sought to coerce behavior out of me and in so doing failed me. But the Spirit, by inhabiting me, has empowered me to do the very things that the law demanded.

He then has to go into a clarification of the Law and Sin. The Law is good, its demands are righteous, but it has no power to effect that which it demands. In fact, the commandment can sometimes render the law impossible to fulfill. Think of the command to love God with all your heart and soul and mind. If you obey the commandment, you are in essence failing to keep it. To love someone out of a sense of duty is not loving them! It really is something of a catch 22.

But the demand to love God is a good demand. The problem is that in the presence of sin, even the good demand becomes twisted and deformed. In the perfection of Eden, God had commanded the first humans to love him, but it was not perceived of as a command, but something else. It was not a burden, but a joy. It is true the Law promises life, but it doesn't work that way. There is no life at the end of that road, only death.

But the Law also functions another way. It prepares me for the Gospel. Just as the plow prepares the ground for the planter or the wrecking ball makes way for a new building. The Law by its very destructive work is also making the Gospel possible. In fact, if it doesn't do that work, the Gospel is not nearly as effective. Seed that is thrown on untilled ground does not fare as well as that which is cast on the tilled soil. It germinates, sets a root, competes with the weeds, does just about everything better.

The preacher who is considering the Epistle reading today may well want to take just part of this text. One could preach a sermon on any of the questions surfaced. If you preached the question last week, I would probably suggest you move to the second or third element of this text. But that will present an issue for our folks. Most of them just don't think about the Law of God much. Paul seems to be answering a question which is completely out of our time. If I have to explain why the question is important, I really need to ask whether I am preaching this out of season.

I believe this sermon might want to focus on Sin as a force in the life of the person. It takes something good, in this instance the Law, and turns it to an evil purpose. This talk of forces might be worth further elaboration on the part of the preacher because our language is often filled with fearful talk of forces which play out in our lives. Many of our people feel out of control of their lives and subject to hostile forces. They are simply grist for a great mill, helpless before the economic, political, or global forces that are working against them. This sermon will need to reach ahead a little bit and pluck the Gospel from what Paul says later in chapter 7 and 8. The concluding verses of chapter 8 would be a likely place to start.

Matthew 10:34-42

³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

⁴⁰ "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.

⁴¹ The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.

Jesus speaks in radical terms here. He does not bring a peace the world recognizes, one in which there is an absence of conflict but he is offering a real Shalom, that is what the last part of the text is talking about, a real relationship with him and the Father who sent him. Jesus will smash our earthly concept of peace, hence it feels like conflict, a sword. He comes to realign our lives completely. Even the most basic element of our lives, our families cannot supersede that realignment. He has come to raise the dead. He puts no patch on an old garment or new wine in an old wineskin. He makes anew, and that remaking is done in a new relationship with God which takes form in the service even to the little one who stands in need of a cup of water.

In this sense, losing life for Christ is the real peace. But what is losing one's life? Is this martyrdom? Is this the life that is lost one little act of service at a time? Is this what Paul is talking about in the Epistle lesson in which they are dead in baptism and then made new.

Christianity is really odd this way, this is the peace that passes understanding. We expect things to go from beginning, to middle, and then end. But Christianity does this all mixed up. We go to the font to die, ending life. But the font which is our tomb is also our womb. We are born again. Then the rest of life is the middle, flowing out of the beginning and lived in light of that ending. We have a progression of end, beginning, middle!

Jesus concludes his words to the disciples he is about to send out. The wise preacher will remember to go back to the beginning of all this and realize that this is all motivated by Jesus' great compassion for the crowds who are flocking around them. This is especially important to remember as you come to these words of Jesus. He seems to be speaking almost counter-productively in this. What sort of a missionary preparation is this?

Perhaps it is helpful to us to remember Matthew's audience. He seems to be writing to the Jewish Christians of the first century who have been expelled from the Jewish synagogues. It appears that initially the Jewish Christians continued to meet in the synagogues with their fellow Jews. Something happened in the middle of the century which changed that. Paul was still able to start many of his congregations among Jewish people this way; although, as we see in several cities there was considerable tension (Thessalonica, Corinth, etc.) Many have speculated that the watershed event was the Jewish rebellion of 68-70 AD in which the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The Christian Jews apparently did not participate in the rebellion, appealing to their allegiance to their real king who is Jesus. When the temple was destroyed, the heart of the Jewish faith at the time, some have suggested that the Jewish population lashed out at the Christian Jews in their midst. "If you had helped us, this would not have happened," seems to be the logic at work. As early as the 80's we find documents from synagogue worship that began with an anathema on anyone who followed the Nazarene (Jesus.) Considering that the Jewish revolt was almost a terrorist sort of movement, similar to the IRA or Hezbollah, this might have also included considerable personal, physical risk as well. The IRA were vicious about disciplining what they considered to be Irish defectors or informants to the British.

For Matthew's audience families divided, lives lost for Jesus, and much turmoil was not just a topic for Bible study but was the reality they faced. Matthew seems to tell them with his whole book and this passage in particular that Jesus has seen their sacrifices, acknowledged them, and promises to make it all worthwhile for them.

But there is another interesting dynamic that takes place when a community is fractured and the members turn on one another. Some people are given the gift of peace making, some are given the gift of love and charity, despite the harsh rhetoric. When the community turned on the Christian Jews and expelled them from the synagogue this would have also had an impact upon their relationships. Friends were lost, families were torn up. But undoubtedly some were able to cross those chasms.

What about the old-line Jewish person who simply showed kindness and hospitality to a Jewish Christian because they were Jewish? What about the person who gave us a cup of cold water, opened their home to us, welcomed us, received us? It might have been at considerable risk to

themselves, it might have jeopardized their own place in the community or subjected them to harassment or even threats of physical violence. The Christian may have asked, "God, what will happen to them?" Through Matthew, Jesus is telling these folks that God has seen these acts of kindness as well. If they were kind to you, they were kind to Jesus. We will have to leave that up to him to decide how to reward them, but the promise is that Jesus received the cup of cold water they offered to you when you really needed it. Remember he has united himself to us. We are his body. That not only applies to the moments when we speak his word and someone hears his voice in our voice, but it also seems to be when we are being persecuted for the faith. When Jesus confronts Saul on the road to Damascus he does not say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting my people?" He asks "Why are you persecuting me?"

So what are we to say about this? Our people are not particularly being persecuted for their faith, at least not like this. They might reasonably hope to have their whole family in the faith. If not, they probably are not being asked to choose between the relationship with their children and their own salvation. Few of our delinquent children will ask us to abandon our faith in order for them to attend thanksgiving dinner. I am not sure that I would want to preach the severing of those relationships. I still have hope for those I know and love who are not in Church. And I pray that they will someday come back.

But just because we are not being persecuted for the faith, at least in an active and organized way, this does not mean the tempter is not working. In truth, I believe he often switches tactics. The preacher needs to understand the current situation and apply this text to it. The Devil's whole goal, remember, is to disrupt that discipleship thing – the listening to the word and the subsequent doing. Persecution is a rather crude and often counter-productive method of doing that. The results of more refined or appropriate methods are really the same. People don't listen, people don't do, they are not transformed by the Gospel message into people who desire and live differently than they did before they heard that message.

What discourages our own people from hearing, and more importantly, what has discouraged the folks who are not there from hearing? What good work has God given us to do to combat that? When our people do hear the good news, what keeps them from putting that good news into practice in their lives, especially in terms of being the forgiving, inviting, loving people God has created them to be in Christ? How can we preach, teach, and lead them to vigorous lives of joyful and beautiful service?

Jesus tells us that it is worth it. It might not come cheaply to us, but it is worth it, no matter the cost. Jesus also tells us that this life lived is intimately connected to Him, so that every little deed done to us becomes a deed done to him, and likewise, the deeds done by us can become deeds done by him. Is that the piece that is missing from the hearts and minds of our parishioners?

I wonder if this passage is not best read as a first commandment sort of passage. Is the discussion of loving family, life, or stuff more than Jesus really Jesus making his claim upon us? Is he making the divine claim that he is God in our life, more valuable than anything we might have, even our breath?

Is this a time to remember the old baptismal practice in which candidates for baptism divested themselves of their money, home, clothes, and all worldly possessions prior to entering the water? Upon ascending from the font, those things would be returned to them with the admonition to use them, live with them to the glory of Christ and the Father. Is this what Jesus is saying with these words?

Law

1. Our lives are very wrapped up in some very sinful people, including ourselves. That is evidenced in our families and our relationships.
2. Heaven is perfect, and the standard of heaven is perfection. The broken relationships in which we live are not good enough for heaven. I used to work for a man who restored antique furniture for a living. Max insisted that when it a piece was wobbly, it had to be taken completely apart and re-glued. There simply was no way that you could get glue inside a joint unless it was completely redone. Jesus is not satisfied with the best marriage on earth. The most casual friendship of heaven will be so much better than what the best marriage is here.
3. Christianity is not a recipe for being comfortable. It has great comfort, but not comfortableness.
4. Jesus gets to define discipleship for us. It is listening and doing.
5. The devil wants to disrupt either of those activities. He is just as happy with a baptized Christian who does nothing as he is with an ardent agnostic who refuses to listen. They both serve his purposes rather well.
6. Many of the people we see out there are not believers in Jesus. They have a serious God problem when they die. Hell is real. We love some of those folks. What will happen to them?

Gospel

1. Jesus wrapped himself into the lives of sinful people. He wraps himself into my life every Sunday when I stick my hand out and someone says “take and eat, the body of Christ.”
2. Jesus breaks those sixty year long marriages in death so he may make them better in heaven. Jesus is the master craftsman. And while we may grieve for some of the things that he does, we can rest assured that we are in the hands of the best surgeon, the master, the creator.
3. Christianity, while not comfortable, has great comfort. Paul, despite being in prison and facing death can write a joyful letter like Philippians. Like Jeremiah last week, the focus of his life was not himself but Christ and that view did not change even when there were bars on the windows.

4. Jesus' definition of discipleship is good. His Word has power to equip us to do. His Word creates the faith which does the deed.
5. Christ knows our enemies and works mightily on our behalf. He knows our temptation and how easily we succumb. Remember he withstood the whole of Satan's might in his own temptation. He has bested this ancient foe. We may fall in battle, but the war is won.
6. God sees the world through your eyes too. The ones who are kind to you are also kind to Jesus. I do not know exactly what that means for them in the hereafter, but Jesus does. If they gave you a cup of cold water, he drank it with you.

Sermon Themes:

1. That we may bear fruit: Romans 7:1-13 (That the Spirit would move the hearer who has long enjoyed the sweet Gospel to get up and follow Jesus with a life a service and love.)

The preacher using this text will need to catch the hearer up on the essential of what has happened prior, namely the clearest statement of the Gospel in the entire New Testament. A righteousness from God, apart from works of the law, has been revealed – namely Jesus Christ. In truth, even if he is not using this as the sermon series, he will want to do that. But that clear Gospel is not the end of the story, and this is where the sermon really wants to take off: The Gospel is purposeful in our lives. Paul addresses folks who already know the law, they are familiar with the rules and the requirements, but they cannot seem to do it. Sound familiar? We don't need more and better rules in order to live the God pleasing life – we need a whole new life. The rules God has given are good and true, but now they can serve only to condemn me and bring my sin to light. This sermon directs the hearer away from the false and misleading promise of the rules – salvation must lie somewhere else. We have died to these things, to be raised with Christ to something else. In the body of Christ we have died to rule keeping in order to please God – but we have been raised to another sort of obedience, an obedience which flows from faith.

This sermon focuses on a great mystery of Christianity. Why do the Christians sometimes do such remarkable things? I am thinking of the woman who devotes her life to teaching children in Sunday School or making quilts for LWR. I am thinking of the many martyrs and persecuted Christians. I am thinking of Catherine of Sienna who ran toward the plague victims to help them when everyone else ran away. What moves them? It is so much more than reward and punishment, so much more than a fear or even a sense of duty. It is faith – a loving relationship with God in which he has saved me, made me his child, filled me with his Spirit. That flows out of me, the living water Jesus spoke of on Pentecost a couple of weeks ago. My whole life is now a joyful, glorious response to his great love me.

The preacher of this sermon will have to keep some things clear. This is not an economic relationship in which we buy things from God or God has bought something, namely our obedience. This is far more the loving relationship in which people serve one another. A parent does not love the child because later in life that child may support the parent. A parent who cares for a child for such a reason will not be a very good parent. Likewise a child does not run some mental calculus about cost benefit analysis when she joins her mother in the kitchen. She wants to be with her mom and help. That sort of motive needs to be at the forefront here.

The Gospel is the motivator here. But remember the question which Paul posed and just how modern it is. Paul had imagined someone who had questioned the real place of a life of good work. After all, since we live under grace, the scoundrel gets into heaven just as much as the good man or woman. So our sins really don't count, they don't matter. Just do whatever you want. This is remarkably close to the attitudes that float around our congregations these days. I am not sure that we have thought it through quite this way, but the result is the same.

Paul's answer to this question is that we are simply different people now that Jesus has done his work and poured out the Holy Spirit on us. We are no longer sinners, but people who love and delight in the will of God. We do not earn by our deeds, but we live out our true identity. We died with Christ in the body, and raised with him, we are a new person.

2. "Down with the idols – all of them – even the ones I love!" Matthew 10:34-42 (That the Spirit of God lead the hearer to recognize the potential even of blessings to be an idol, disavow such idolatry and thus receive the true peace which comes from God.)

Not peace but a sword: Jesus has hard words for us today. Families are such a precious gift from God, but even the best of things can be an idol. Our families are not heaven. Corrupted by sin, they too must be received as the broken realities that they are. Even the best relationship I have on earth is not fit for heaven, but it must be undone, remade, and perfected in Christ. As long as we are holding onto something which we would call "good" absolutely good, we will never really know a true rest as a gift from God. We will always be serving the "idol" which is really intended as a gift from God, a means for us to enjoy, worship, and serve him above all things.

The Gospel is a little scanty in this reading, you will want to reach forward on this one, but leave something for next week too. Be careful how you preach this too. Some folks may be so involved with this sort of an idolatry that they are not able to listen to the radical nature of Jesus' words on this topic.

And remember, we are not preaching against families, but against the idea that our families are the ultimate or final good for our lives. All families are in need of forgiveness and I think that if mention that we will get some traction with folks. Most of the students I receive in my class are convinced that their own families are the oddest or

most dysfunctional families ever. That is why I always take some time to read the story of Jacob and his two wives, two concubines, 12 sons, and completely messed up family.

But listen to the media, especially some of the Christian media, and you would be convinced that we worship families. Jesus will not allow us this idolatry. Instead he replaces it with the true worship, himself. This turns the simplest of acts, even giving a cup of cold water to a child, into an act of true worship. When I see my family instead as the opportunity for Christ to show up, it becomes not the end of my faith but the means of faith's expression to Christ. That critical difference serves to redeem even the most broken of families. Jesus notes that he is there even in the persecuted moments, even in the ugliest of times.

3. The Prophet has Spoken Peace, and it is True (Old Testament and Gospel – That the Spirit of God would call the hearer from trusting in the peace that fits inside my human understanding to trust the peace that passes our human understanding.)

Alternate title: The peace that passes human understanding.

This sermon wants to proclaim that the rule of prophecy and its validation which Jeremiah lays down is met in Christ. He proclaims and brings a real peace to us. (Consider Ephesians 2:14ff. in which Paul tells the Ephesians that Jesus is our peace, bringing Jew and Gentile together.)

The preacher will want to proclaim that this peace which passes human understanding is what you proclaim today.

Jeremiah and Jesus rail against the false peace of Hananiah and all who would proclaim what we want to hear, that our lives are basically OK, we need some cosmetic work sure, but Jesus will surely bring me largely as I am to heaven, just give me eternal health. Not so! Christ has a complete new human in mind, a wholly different sort of life.

Jesus goes right to the basic structures of life, family itself. In Jesus' day it was tribalism. You would never help someone outside the tribe with even a cup of cold water. But Jesus offers a life which is ours in losing all that old life. Our identity is so wrapped up with God that the one who receives us receives Jesus and the Father who sent him.

This sermon will challenge the expectations that people have of Jesus. We want him to be nice, but he offers us so much more. He offers us nothing less than eternity itself. We set our sights too low. We are content to settle for playing Christian in this life, but not living the life which God has radically transformed. We slouch along, but God calls us to live in vibrant and effusive peace which overflows from our lives into the lives of all who are around. He locates this in the immediacy of service. The cup of cold water given to the little one in faith is seen by God himself.

4. You are that sort of important to God (Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would encourage and embolden the hearer to a life of vibrant and visible faith.)

Bad times are sometimes the best measure of a person and a relationship. I remember when I messed up a few times and my father loved me despite my foolishness. I once put his car into the ditch and totaled it. He was genuinely glad I was not hurt and cheerfully went out and bought another car (same model, year, and color!)

Matthew's audience were facing persecution. The Jewish community had excluded the Jewish Christian community. We probably imagine this along the lines of being the son or daughter no longer welcome at family reunions, but this was much more serious for Jewish people. Their family connection was strangely wrapped up into their connection to God. Remember, God had promised that the messiah would come through a child. When you were cut off from the community, the family which was to produce that child, you were cut off from salvation itself. Their whole identity was as a member of this community. Matthew will spend a great deal of this book assuring them that Jesus was the real and true son of Abraham and they were the true community.

But being kicked out of the family had real consequences and sometimes this hurt. Matthew, whose community is enduring this right, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, remembers these words of Jesus. He even repeats them in chapter 25. If someone gives you so much as a cup of cold water, they will not lose their reward. Think about that. Israel is a hot, dry place. Having no friends in town could mean that you were very thirsty. What if someone just gives you a drink? They might be running a risk doing that. You might not be able ever to tell them how much that means. Jesus tells the first century Christians and the 21st century Christians that he sees every one of those cups of water. And the person who was kind to you will be rewarded.

I have no idea what that reward will be. Matthew 25 intimates that this might be in the last judgment. I don't think that the preacher needs to go there. But what I think Matthew is trying to tell his persecuted and lonely audience is that they are this sort of important to God. He is keeping tabs even on the smallest acts of kindness shown to us. Those people who unwittingly are good to us may find something really beautiful happening in their lives. It is a little like being nice to the guy on the street and discovering that he is a multi-millionaire and has gone back to his house and called the bank and paid off your mortgage.

God is watching what happens to you. Yes, there is judgment for the persecutors. But there is also blessing for the man or woman who is kind to us. For the modern hearer, for whom God seems to be so distant, this is a comfort of another kind. God is very vested in what happens to us. Jesus died for us after all.