

## Matthew 10:24-39

Today's reading is a continuation of Jesus' instructions to his disciples as he sends them out in pairs to do what he's been doing: teaching, healing, sharing the dinner tables of strangers. In the earlier part of his instructions, he'd focused on specific do's and don't's like where to accept hospitality and what to do when you're rejected. The part we read today broadens out, and is more clearly a collation by Matthew of sayings of Jesus that Matthew sees as applying to the church writ large. Now we're supposed to be mindful of the weightiness of our mission and the authority of the one who sends us. We're supposed to be prepared for intimidation, but to remember that God who sent us knows every hair of our heads and isn't losing track of us on our hazardous mission. And we're to be unsurprised when opposition to us arises from within our own circle--our family, our household, our closest relatives--and be ready to choose our mission over our family if need be.

This sounds harsh today, but it's even more extreme in context. In first-century Palestine (and the whole Roman empire), there was a sharp sense of social stratification. People who engaged in inappropriate social relations such as would happen while roaming the countryside risked being cut off from the networks on which their social positions depended. This was deadly serious. Alienation from family or clan could literally be a matter of life or death, especially for the elite, who would risk everything by the wrong kind of association with the wrong kind of people.

Of course it was integral to the Jesus movement that this kind of association across kinship and status lines become standard operating procedure.<sup>i</sup> Not just while traveling, but also when at rest, Jesus' followers were *supposed to* be a motley crew. And if they came from the

upper class, they were essentially trading down, and alienating their families of origin.

Nobody likes to have to choose between two groups of people, or alienate one group in order to be faithful to the other. The mildest form of this is what we see in Lake Wobegon, where the newspaper editor chooses not to print certain stories because, as he says, "I have to live here too!" It's a real thing, the small-town aversion to making waves. I remember in Stockton realizing that there were unwritten rules about who was in and who was out, and God help the person who transgressed them. The unwritten rules were how order was kept.

This same firm division between "in" and "out" is evident in authoritarian religious groups. I recently watched the Netflix documentary on the fundamentalist groups that clustered around Bill Gothard and his Institute of Basic Life Principles. The Duggar family, with nineteen children, were a public face of the IBLP, if that helps place it. Their idea was that they would have huge families and raise up a "Joshua generation", referring to the leader who had picked up from Moses when Moses died. The Joshua generation would enter politics and business and re-create the United States as a [fundamentalist] Christian nation. Well, the Joshua generation has grown up, or some of it has, and it contains some doubters who would like to have a word. After I viewed the documentary I tuned in to a few podcast conversations about it by these young doubters, and they were all processing trauma from having been raised in an air-tight environment meant to protect them from "the world." Home-schooled, forbidden to date, insulated from scientific information, these young people were raised to obey authority unquestioningly and so, of course, they were set up for abuse, within the family and within their churches. Bill Gothard himself, who never married but somehow knew how marriages and families should be run, was eventually expelled from his organization because of his sexual

abuse of girls and young women.

For survivors of this kind of religious authoritarianism, it's confusing because Jesus and his mission are associated *with* the family, not pitted *against* the family. But while some of them have rejected faith, others are renegotiating it and seeing that the cocoon they were brought up in is antithetical to discipleship. The appeal of the IBLP to adults was that it would help you, perhaps someone whose childhood wasn't great, to create and conduct a wholesome family that God would protect. But it did the opposite, *because* it came from a place of fear. Religious abuse happens when religious organizations become authoritarian and then seek to maintain their authority over others *and* to instill fear in their adherents about the dangers of the outside world--non-Christians, sex, science, people who don't believe in hell.

I am convinced that Matthew put Jesus' instructions for the church into this passage that's ostensibly marching orders for one time-limited discipleship mission. He's just saying too much for that one project. So I think Jesus is saying for his followers in all times, there are structures that bind us together in unhealthy ways. Dismantle them. There may be people who are literally your family who tell you that the rest of the world is dangerous and out to get you, and that you'll go to hell if you don't obey. Ignore them; ignore the appeal to fear. Do not make keeping the peace your highest good. Instead, ask yourself, where are the most vulnerable people in this situation? and stand up for them bravely.

This is hard and sometimes damaging. In another organization I belong to, one member who is socially awkward had made a younger woman feel uncomfortable. Although everybody belongs, and there's lots of tolerance for motleyness, the most vulnerable person in that situation was the young woman. So senior staff talked with this member, as caringly as possible,

but also trying to be clear about boundaries. That member left, with hurt feelings. Those of us who know about it feel really bad. But it was a choice that had to be made in favor of the most vulnerable, because the situation was going to cost somebody.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup>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; <sup>36</sup>and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” Jesus anticipates hostility and/or indifference along his disciples’ routes. We as the church mostly get indifference in this time and place, but in some venues we might find hostility. Schoolteachers and medical care providers certainly do these days. Judges too.

But Jesus also speaks powerful words of promise. God notices, keeps track of, treasures the common sparrow--and we are of more value to God than any sparrows. God loves us so much that God even knows how many hairs are on our heads. And above all, “those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” We all know how to lose our lives so they’re lost. Getting swallowed up by things that falsely promise to protect us from what we fear is a good way to get lost. Here though Jesus is showing us how to lose our lives so they will be found. The way to do that is to follow his example, to walk in his tracks which he has already made ahead of us--to dismantle fear-based structures, to look out for the vulnerable, and to seek out people who are different from us and thus build a community based on love.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, strengthen us where we are weak, build us up where we are torn down, and prop us up on every leaning side.

---

<sup>i</sup> Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh <https://www.holytextures.com/2011/05/matthew-10-24-39-year-a-pentecost-june-19-june-25-proper-7-ordinary-12-sermon.html>