

“The true life”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Matthew 10:24-39*

by Rev. Patrick Heery

Let's take a poll: Do you think the people behind the Revised Common Lectionary, the people who plan our Scripture readings, were having a laugh with this one? I know these are somber scholars we're talking about, but scheduling this text for Father's Day! "For I have come to set a man against his father." Happy Father's Day!

What do we even make of this text? Some of it is beautifully comforting: God knows every hair on our head; do not be afraid, for God loves you; do not worry, the evil that people do will eventually come to light, bringing justice; Jesus is on our side. But the rest of it? We are going to suffer and be persecuted as Jesus' disciples; we shouldn't fear the people who can kill our bodies, we should fear the one who can kill our bodies AND our souls (gee, thanks! that really makes me feel better!); if we deny Jesus, he'll deny us; Jesus came to bring a sword; Jesus sets us against our families. It might be at this point that someone says, "Um, driver, I think I got on the wrong bus. I wanted the 'Prince of Peace, Love wins' bus, not the 'You're going to die' bus."

Since it's Baccalaureate Sunday, I also can't help but imagine Jesus delivering this message at a graduation ceremony. I'm not sure he'd be invited back: Congratulations, you've graduated, now prepare for a life of misery and hardship. **WORST COMMENCEMENT SPEECH EVER.**

Except, there's a lot of truth here. Following Jesus is risky. When Jesus gives this speech, he's in the process of sending out the disciples to preach the gospel. He needs them to know that not everyone is going to like what they have to say. The disciples are going to encounter resistance, not only from their enemies, but from their friends, their families, their neighbors, their priests and governors, reasonable people, good people, the ones they thought they could count on.

The Greek philosopher Plato explained it in his allegory of the cave. If you've lived all your life in the dark, if that's all you know, the light is dangerous. Even if the light is the very thing you've been seeking, it hurts the eyes. And when one comes to you, saying I've climbed out of the cave, I've seen the light, I've come back to tell you all, that one is rarely greeted as a savior.

The gospel is like that bright light, revealing that what we took for reality was an illusion. Truth is God. Truth is Love. Truth isn't hierarchy predicated upon power, or wealth, or race, or even religion; it's community. The truth is that we are called to something better.

In this new world, the powerful are torn from their thrones, the captives go free, enemies are loved, money is discarded, laws are broken.

Lance Pape writes, "If Jesus were really the... nice guy we often insist on imagining, should he not have been able to stay out of trouble? What incited people to call him such appalling names

(prince, not of peace, but of demons)? Why would following him wreck families? How did he end up on a cross? The answer is not that his opponents had strange and unsettling ideas, but that he did.”

Jesus offers to completely reorient our lives. He’s not talking about Sunday mornings, or church membership, or writing a check, or even the occasional volunteering. These are all good things, but they run the danger of too easily conforming to our lives as they are. We fit God into the life we already have, when we should be fitting our life into God. What Jesus offers is discipleship: every moment in service of God. And there’s the rub.

Because if you have a vision in you of what the world should be, if you have a truth that burns inside, and if you’re willing to give yourself totally to that truth, it’s not going to be easy. You will suffer. You will sacrifice. The world will try to buy you off, to convince you to settle for something less. It will tell you that it’s so much easier not to be part of a church community, or advocate justice, or pray or think or talk about God. It’s so much easier just to be successful and have fun with your family. Why be controversial? Why suffer?

It’s not all that different from when Jenna and I think about exercising, and how hard that would be, and decide instead to plop on the couch. It’s easier. But of course, in opting for the path of least resistance, we’re missing out on that one most precious thing: life.

That’s what Jesus offers. Life. Not a cheap knock-off, not a shadow, not something that leaves you always hungry, but real life. A life grounded in the source of your being, while belonging to something bigger than you.

Everyone suffers, but only a rare few live.

“Those who lose their life for my sake,” says Jesus, “will find it.”

Why settle for a facsimile, when we could have the real thing? Why settle for chains in a cave, when we could be free?

I would follow Jesus for the same reason Thoreau went to the woods, when he wrote, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

I want what poet Mary Oliver described, when she wrote, “When it’s over, I want to say all my life I was a bride to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real... I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.”

To live, I must follow the only real thing there is: God. I must follow her into the woods where creation sings, and into the sanctuary where God is worshiped, and into the halls of thought where existence is pondered. I must follow her into the streets where justice is demanded, and into the margins where people suffer, and into the arms of those whose lives and voices have been said not to matter. I must follow her into the places where my purpose, my joy, and my

truth meet—no matter what others may think, or do. I cannot afford to be silent, to compromise, or to accommodate powers and ideologies of this world. I cannot afford the success, or comfort, they offer. For, as Jesus said, “Those who find their life will lose it.” I must give it away—to God.

I know that it won’t be easy. I know I’ll make mistakes, capitulate to other interests and powers, and need God’s forgiveness. I know I can’t do it alone, that I go as a disciple, following the One who does what I cannot.

But I also know that I have nothing to fear. Because, the Truth is the one thing they cannot take from us. And as that old hymn goes: “And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us; We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure, One little word shall fell him.”<sup>1</sup>

For that word, I’d give my life. How about you? **Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”