

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

You may recall that in last week's gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus is preparing to send his disciples out into the towns and villages of their homeland to proclaim the Gospel, the good news, that the Kingdom of God is coming near. He is sending them out as sheep among wolves, he admits. He is giving them instructions about methodology both practical and spiritual, how they are to be wise and wiley as serpents, yet innocent as doves. Well, today we continue that passage, that discourse, he is having with them. He is describing the worst-case-scenarios they are likely to encounter. He doesn't want them to be blindsided. He doesn't expect that their mission will be an easy one. They may, as he puts it, need to pick up their crosses and follow him into the paths of danger, where they might lose their lives for the sake of God's dream. Yet, despite the danger and discouragement, he wants them to proclaim the good news from the rooftops. What they hear the Spirit whispering in their prayers, he wants them to shout out loud for all to hear.

But, I have to ask, how in heaven's name can the gospel message be so offensive that it would turn families against one another? How can it lead to civil war among members of the human family? It's so simple, isn't it? Love God, and love your neighbor. Treat others the way you would be treated. Respect the dignity of every human being, no matter whether they are gentile or Jew, Samaritan or Judean, no matter from what language or nation or tribe or ethnicity they come. How can that be so offensive? Why couldn't that be shouted from the rooftops without seeming like the drawing of a sword among your peers? And, remember, Jesus didn't invent that teaching; he merely summarized the ancient Hebrew codes, distilled them into a credo, a motto, for his followers to remember easily. All the laws and the prophets proclaimed nothing less, right? Yet in sending the disciples out with this crucial message, in calling us to do the same in our own time, he foresees danger, and the sharp edge of a threatening sword.

Of course, Jesus pushed the edge of the envelope by teaching that we ought to love our enemies, too, not just our friends, and that the poor are stakeholders in the kingdom, too. And the infirm and the disadvantaged and the underprivileged as well. But it still seems quite simple, doesn't it? The Gospel message, the good news meant for everyone, couldn't be enough to go to war over, could it? Well, the evidence would seem to testify to the contrary. Religious wars alone account for a significant amount of human misery and suffering, as swords of self-righteousness have been raised against one another down through our checkered past. And brothers and sisters from different tribes are still treated with violence and disrespect even in the most enlightened societies on this planet. Never mind that ancient patriarchs like Abraham kept slaves as their due for their position in the hierarchy of society, but know that slavery is still insidiously common in this world, sometimes even under our own unsuspecting noses. While the annual celebration of Juneteenth, marking the end of legal slavery in our nation, is a true holy day, it is, in some respects, also a reminder that the work of emancipation is yet incomplete. There is much more to be shouted from the rooftops.

As simple and straightforward as the Gospel teachings seem to us, our relationships still become so darn complicated! In this passage from Genesis, Sarah's jealousy and Abraham's indecision lead to a complicated and toxic result, to the misery of the slave girl Hagar and her son, Abe's son. And, worst of all, the text seems to make God complicit! Abraham hears God telling him to give in to Sarah's anger, to break all the laws of Judaism and decency and send the two out into the wilderness unprotected and unprepared to face certain death. He is the leader of the household, the patriarch of the tribe, and by ancient law he is charged with the care and feeding of all his family. Yet he abandons his responsibility, and believes that God told him it was okay. Is it possible that he, like us, is hard of hearing when it comes to God's voice? Is it possible that he hears only what he wants and hopes to hear? Okay, sure, he, and we, might rationalize that God has some unknown plan that makes this abandonment turn out to be okay. I mean, God works in mysterious ways. But

often, I would hazard every day, God acts to turn our irresponsibility into something good, or at least better, despite our errors in judgment. To insist that that was what God intended in the first place seems a bit self-serving, doesn't it? That God's dream would include cruelty as a method of deliverance, that God would endorse disrespect of persons, no matter who they are, to push an agenda forward, all seems very suspect to me. More likely, I think, is that we just don't hear God's voice as clearly as we sometimes think.

You have often heard me say that I think that our Christian faith, in order to be sacramental, depends our discerning God's intentions and doing our best to align our own intentions to God's. That being on the same page with God ought to be the fundamental basis of our ministries and mission. Well, you can imagine how problematic that becomes if we don't hear God's voice clearly, if, in fact, we hear the echo of our own voices instead. If what we are shouting from the rooftops is a corruption of God's message that is actually our own self-serving proclamation disguised as divine teaching. It is a danger. It can turn family members against one another. It can, however inadvertently, deny all that Jesus taught, all that has been revealed to us at such a cost. And it separates us from God, even when we mistakenly think that the kingdom of heaven has come so near to our opinions, and that we are doing God's own work.

I am reminded of such a mistake from our regional history. Following a popular ideal of the day, Christian and civic reformers met at an Adirondack lodge in 1883 to address the integration of Native Americans into civilized white society. This large group included pastors and leaders of many denominations, who felt that God had called them together to solve a great problem, and that they had truly discerned God's almighty agenda. They named their group "Friends of the Indians" and their work led to the establishment of Indian schools from sea to shining sea, taking the very youngest of the children with the intent of transforming them from heathen aborigines to civilized Christians. To save their souls. Not foreseeing the unintended consequences, they promoted separating these children from their families and from their cultures, forbidding them to use their native languages and their Indian names, dressing them up as working-class whites, and training them to be productive industrial workers. The brutality with which this transformation was accomplished has become legendary, and has been revealed in heart-breaking accounts.

Those who would be heroes are as flawed as the rest of us. In writing about Bible heroes, the ancient scribes couldn't even cover the flaws. Flawed men and women living in flawed societies, and yet God made use of them, when God's dream was truly and unmistakably heard. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, King David, all were painfully human. Even Peter, who was to become a revered church leader, denied Jesus more than once. I recall Charles Abraham, one of our dear parish friends, making the important point that God takes the flawed and uses their God-given gifts to realize the great eternal dream. Warts and all. It is an important fact to remember: While we can trust God, we often have trouble trusting what we discern God really wants us to hear. Too often we substitute what we think we want to hear. And when we act according to that deception, unintended consequences generally result. That's why we have confession in our liturgy. That's why we are so grateful for the inspirational gift of the Holy Spirit. That's why we need to keep reminding each other that God is love, and that anything which does not, first and foremost, have love as its intent is not of God nor of God's great dream.

So, we pray...Heavenly Father, you have given us each special and unique talents and yet have created us all equal in your sight. And you have graciously given your Holy Spirit that we might know your true intent. Help us to open the ears of our hearts, that we might hear the whispers of your grace and then proclaim them boldly from the rooftops, that our world might finally be healed by your love, for Christ's sake and in Christ's Name. Amen.