



That Radical Jesus:
"DO NOT THINK I'VE COME TO BRING PEACE!"

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"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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; and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

"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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:34-39)

In the south gallery of the *Hagia Sophia*, the magnificent Orthodox church built in the sixth century by the Emperor Justinian in Constantinople, is a gilded mosaic of Christos Pantocrator. *Christos*, of course, means "Christ." *Pantocrator* is a Greek word meaning "Ruler of All." The haloed Christ is seated on a throne in the blue robe of royalty holding a jewel-encrusted Bible in one hand and making the sign of Trinitarian blessing with the other. Standing to his left and right are the robed, crowned, and likewise haloed Emperor Constantine IX Monomachus and the Empress Zoe, who ruled the Byzantine Empire in the eleventh century. There could be no clearer picture of the understanding of the relationship between Divine power and human power which prevailed in that age. Nor, ironically, could there be a clearer example of the limitations of human power. Turns out Constantine was Zoe's third husband. She poisoned the first and had the second imprisoned, so the mosaic is a palimpsest. The images of his two predecessors have been scraped off so Constantine's image could be added.

While images of Christ, the ruling King and Judge, abound in Christian art, the Gospels clearly tell us that in his earthly life, Jesus flatly refused the role of King as the world has always defined it. This refusal was hard for everybody, especially his disciples, to understand. The very word "Messiah" means "King." Literally, it means "Anointed One," which came from the ritual of coronation. The Jews were expecting a "Messiah" or "King" who would lead them to military victory over their foes, who would establish their domination over all the other nations of the earth, who would rule in justice but with absolute power over all humanity. And one of the distinctive things about Jesus is that he refused this role, choosing the way of the cross instead.

We call Jesus the Prince of Peace. We call him “Wonderful counselor. Almighty God. Everlasting Father. The Prince of Peace!” We remember how he refused to rally the people of Israel to rebel against the Romans, as so many so-called “saviors” did before and after him. We remember how in some of his final words he declared, “Peace. I give to you my peace. Not as this world gives, do I give to you.” We remember when he was betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and Peter lopped off the ear of one of the guards, how he healed that ear and told Peter to put down that sword, for “those who live by the sword, die by the sword.” And we recall how Christians, for over 400 years—almost twice the age of our country—refused to take up arms and serve in military forces. Peace characterized the teachings of Jesus and the practice of the church.

Yet here in Matthew, chapter 10, Jesus says something that seemingly directly contradicts all of that. He says, “Do *not* think I have come to bring peace. I do *not* come to bring peace, but a sword.” And it sounds decisive. Firm. Couldn’t be more clear-cut. This one statement has been used by generations of followers as justification for wars and even crusades. And it seems to contradict every other teaching Jesus made regarding peace. It contradicts both his life and personal example. So, once again, we run into one of Christ’s hard, difficult-to-understand sayings.

What’s going on here? Is this the same Jesus who said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest?” Is this the gentle shepherd who leads the flock? What is this?

Preachers like to stay away from this passage if at all possible: “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” Nobody wants to hear these words. We are peaceful people. We want to come to church to feel comfortable, not uncomfortable. We want to hear that following Jesus will bring comfort, joy and peace of mind to our harried, worry-filled existence. We want this sanctuary to be a loving, safe place where we are needed and cared for. We want worship to be exciting, the fellowship to be community-building, the education classes to be challenging. We want to feel good about being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The truth is, this declaration by Jesus has nothing to do with being a license for violence. This passage has nothing to do with whether Jesus is a warrior and wants us to be, too. It harkens back to our theme of last fall, of putting first things first; of loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. It has everything to do with the consequences of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ. The “sword,” of course, is symbolic. What Jesus is saying to us is that when we make the decision to follow him, it’s going to cause conflict within our families and with our friends. “I have come,” Jesus said, “to set a man *against* his father, and a daughter *against* her mother, and a daughter-in-law *against* her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”

This declaration of Jesus is his very realistic understanding that when people make the decision to follow him, there’s going to be conflict with one’s family and friends because his Way goes counter to this world. *If* you really follow him. It is not a justification for the use of force. Jesus had simply seen the division he causes. When Jesus called Peter, saying, “Follow me,” Peter

dropped his fishing net and followed. And who did he leave behind? His wife. His mother. There was no small bit of conflict there, I'm sure.

In Luke's Gospel, which parallels Matthew here, the story is told of three men Jesus met along the dusty roads of ancient Israel.ⁱ We do not know the names of these men, so I will give them nicknames. The first one I'll call "Eager Eddie." He approached Jesus with exuberant enthusiasm, saying, "Master, I will follow you wherever you go."

To his credit, Jesus didn't sugar-coat a thing. He knew his Way was hard. So he said, in effect, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but I don't even have a place of my own in which to sleep. Are you ready to live with that kind of insecurity?"

The second man in our text for today was one whom Jesus actually called to follow him. I refer to him as "Daddy's Boy." He replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." There was no more sacred act by a son in Jesus' day than burying his father. But Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

That sounds awfully harsh and insensitive on Jesus' part. Is this the Jew whose own law, the ten commandments, say "Honor your father and your mother"? In other words, let your spiritually unawakened relatives care for your elderly parent. *You* who have been spiritually awakened must serve the living Christ.

The third man who approached Jesus on the road was "Larry Look Back." He too offers what seems a reasonable excuse for not following Jesus right away. He says, "Lord, first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." But Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God."

"Larry Look Back" represents those who find it difficult to cut ties that bind them to their past. Jesus used an agricultural image to make a point. Even a city slicker knows that you can't plow a straight furrow if you're always looking back over your shoulder. If you are going to plow straight, you have to fix on a point of orientation in front of you and move toward it. The disciple of Jesus must fix on Christ as that focal point.

All of this is as hard as hard can be. His burden may be gentle, but only after we decide to carry it. And here's what Jesus is ultimately doing. Behind this radical teaching Jesus is doing something amazingly new: he's redefining what the meaning is of "family." He's redefining precisely what family is.

So I invite you to reflect on Jesus' own life and family. Remember when Simeon blessed the baby Jesus, he said to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."ⁱⁱ Mary didn't understand it, but we'll come back to it. And when Jesus was 12, his parents went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Jesus stayed behind to learn from the rabbis in the temple. His parents were furious because they didn't know where he was. All Jesus said was, "Don't you know? I have to be in my father's house."ⁱⁱⁱ

Do you remember the passage in Luke 8 where Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him teach? Remember, they couldn't reach him because there were so many people. Others elbowed in and told Jesus his mom and family were there. You'd think any preacher would love to have his mother and family there. But Jesus said, "My *mother* and my *brothers* are those who *hear* the word of God and *do* it!" And, yes, those words ran a sword through his mother's soul, as Simeon prophesied.

Jesus enlarges our understanding of what family is. Jesus radically redefines it. Family is not blood. Family is not genes. Family is not chromosomes. Family becomes *huge*, with lepers and bent-over women and tax collectors and women with hemorrhages and blind men and Roman centurions and a thief on the cross. They were family because they declared allegiance to the one true God. Yes, they argued. Yes, they had disagreements. But they remained a family because Jesus was their Lord. They remained one because, unlike those men Jesus met on the road, they took the heat and decided to follow Jesus.

Let me close with a story about commitment. In 1904 William Borden, heir to the Borden Dairy Estate, graduated from a Chicago high school as a millionaire. His parents gave him a trip around the world. Traveling through Asia and the Middle East, Borden was given by God a burden for the world's suffering people. Writing home, he said, "I'm going to give my life to prepare for the mission field." When he made that decision, he wrote in the back of his Bible two words: "No Reserves." After graduating from Yale, he turned down numerous high-paying jobs and headed to seminary. At that time he entered two more words in his Bible: "No Retreats."

After completing his studies at Princeton Seminary, Borden sailed for China. On the way he stopped in Egypt for additional training. While there he was stricken by meningitis and died within a month. Perhaps you are thinking: What a waste! But William Borden didn't think so. Shortly before he died he entered two more words in his Bible. Now the statement read: "No Reserves, No Retreats, No Regrets." For, as Christ ended this teaching, "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. For those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

When we come to Christ's Table this day, let us come with "no reservations, no retreats, no regrets!" And let us willingly join the glad family of those who have put God first and have decided to follow Jesus.

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- i. Luke 9:57-62
 - ii. Luke 2:34-35
 - iii. Luke 2:49