

The UMC of Berea
Romans 6.1-11; Matthew 10.24-39
3rd Sunday after Pentecost

I've come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. People's enemies are members of their own households.

How's that for a Father's Day greeting from Jesus?

Those who love father or mother more than me aren't worthy of me. Those who love son or daughter more than me aren't worthy of me.

I remember one of my teachers in seminary remarking that anyone who tried to point to so-called “biblical family values” as a goal for modern families must not have read much of our scriptures.

Those who don't pick up their crosses and follow me aren't worthy of me. Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them.

This is “tough talk” from Jesus today, and it comes at the tail-end of a “commencement speech” of sorts as Jesus prepares his twelve closest followers for their first mission apart from him. They are to travel around, demonstrating—through words and actions—what God's dream, the beloved community, is, interrupting life as they knew it with new possibilities for healing, wholeness, truth-telling, and repairing long-ruptured relationships.

“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with diseases, and throw out demons,”¹ he'd told them earlier in this same chapter. It is no small miracle that Jesus trusts them with this mission and ministry, especially so early in their journey with him. But this miracle of Jesus' confidence in these twelve often-bumbling disciples offers us some hope, for we, too, often struggle to comprehend Jesus' power—to hold onto and live toward a vision of God's dream. And yet, we, too, are sent out anyway to demonstrate “beloved community living” amid our daily lives.

In today's section of Jesus' teaching—on the cusp of sending the twelve back out into the world—Jesus pauses to equip them with this final spiritual gift: perseverance, endurance, resilience in the face of resistance. He does not sugarcoat the dangers of this life into which he is calling them—and calling *us* now, today. He is forthright and clear: *Some folks will welcome the gospel—the good news of God's unconditional, justice-seeking love—and others won't. They'll resist the message and the change that comes with it. And they'll resist you, the messengers, too.*

Then, Jesus tempers that warning by reminding us of the *character* and the *faithfulness* of God. God is both unimaginably powerful—pronouncing judgments that yield life and death—and unimaginably tender—noticing every sparrow that falls to the ground and counting every hair on our heads. By remembering—holding onto, carrying with us—God's character and faithfulness, we have all we need: to endure, to keep pressing forward, beyond our fear of rejection or even harm.

And, of course, this “commencement speech” from Jesus is just one moment of the disciples' lifelong process of formation: one moment along the journey of learning what it means to follow Jesus. By continually calling, equipping, and sending us, Jesus shows us—again and again—*who we are*—God's beloved children—*what we're capable of doing when our lives are aligned with God's*—the power to heal and reconcile and transform communities and the

¹ Matthew 10.8

world—and *how to hold onto that truth* even when the going gets really tough, which it will—by remembering God’s faithfulness and love.

It took years of hanging out with Jesus—eating with him, watching him heal folks, hearing him speak truth in love to power, listening to his teachings, seeing him welcome the most marginalized and excluded in their communities—to become the sort of people who were willing to lose their lives for the sake of God’s dream—God’s shalom—in a world still seduced and still captivated by “principalities and powers.”² Christian identity and character formation—the journey of discipleship—lasts a lifetime.

It is into that journey that each of us is invited—welcomed—through the waters and the ritual of our baptism. That’s our reminder today by pairing this hard Gospel lesson with our other reading, from Romans 6. Baptism is our threshold—not into God’s love; that already holds us—and not into the life of any singular congregation—that would be far too small. No, baptism is our threshold into a whole new life: discovering anew both *who* and *whose* we are, so we can hold onto these truths when resistance comes—whether it comes from *without* or *within*.

Sometimes, we might think of baptism as our “rite of initiation,” but more truly, it is our “rite of identity,” reminding us who we are at our core and inviting—imploring—us to live like it. We need continually to be reminded, for there are always so many other ways we identify ourselves: job titles and achievements, roles in the community and within our families. But whatever these other identifiers we hold onto—while each is important and, indeed, helps us to shape and form our lives—yet none of them—nor all of them together—contains *who we are*. *We are God’s beloved children*. Before anything and after everything, that is who we are. That is not just our *role*. That is our fundamental *identity*. And there is nothing we can ever do or fail to do that will change that fact of who we are.

But living into that fact—living fully as God’s beloved child—is not easy and will set us at odds: with the “principalities and powers” and the priorities of the world in which we live. Certainly, that was true for the community around Matthew’s Gospel. Members of the early church were living the strange consequences of their baptism in public—political—ways: selling their possessions and giving everything toward economic justice; refusing conscription into the military because they knew it was better to die than to kill; associating with folks whom others avoided—criminals and slaves, folks who were sick and folks who “weren’t from here.” And as a result, some of them were being kicked out of their families.

So, when Jesus talks today about families being divided—specifically because some of them were living the gospel—that was not hypothetical. It was their lived reality. And so, Jesus’ words here would not have been jarring. They would have been encouragement, empowering them to keep on pressing forward. *Remember who and whose you are*, Jesus says. *Don’t be afraid—not of the things other folks fear: loss of status or safety or even life. God already holds you, and there’s nothing that can shake you from that hold. God has named and claimed you. Do not be afraid.*

Staying centered in this—the “solid rock” of God’s love in our baptism, in *who we are* and *what we’re capable of doing when our lives are aligned with God’s*—gives us the courage we need to keep on keeping on. We, of course, live in a different time and place from those who first heard Jesus’ words: a different world with different consequences for living as those who

² cf. Ephesians 6.12

know God loves us and choose to live Jesus' strange way of life. But doing so still places us at risk—in opposition to the “principalities and powers” of this world.

Recently especially, lots of us have been having hard conversations—learning, searching, growing through tough questions—around systemic injustices including wealth and poverty, access to healthcare, and violence related to our perceptions of “race.” As we do that—as we need to do that—one of the places we are likely to experience some resistance is not just from the world around us—though, certainly, we’ll find resistance there—but also from *within* ourselves, as ways that we have always thought about ourselves, our world, and other people are challenged and brought into question.

Questioning our own privilege—questioning our own roles—questioning the “right next steps” for ourselves, our communities of faith, and our society: this “questioning” is deeply faithful work, but it is also hard. Remembering our baptism—as Romans 6 urges us—gives us the courage we need for this faithful work, because it keeps us centered, clarifying who we are at our core, so that all of our other notions and roles can be set on the periphery where they belong. And thus oriented, we can engage in that work of probing and questioning and wondering—even challenging and changing—without feeling threatened, because we know: there’s nothing that can threaten who we are.

And so, we are set free: free to speak up and to step up. Free to reconcile and repair. Free to give ourselves away for others without recognition or reward. Free to speak truth in love to power, even when it is not comfortable, even when it isn’t trendy, even when it is not easy, and even when it is not we, ourselves, who will benefit most obviously from the structural changes that we need.

We can question our privilege without feeling threatened, because we know: our privilege is not what defines us. And we can challenge our tightly-held ideologies, because we know: our political and economic systems are not what define us. And we can share our resources generously, because we know: they do not define us, either.

We are God’s children, holy and loved—and not only us but every other person, too. And while knowing that—trusting that—doesn’t mean that everything will go smoothly for us all the time, it does mean that we can keep pressing forward with courage. As Romans 6 tells us, through the waters of our baptism we have already died. And we’ve already been raised into a new life in Christ. When, then, shall we fear?

Or, in the words of one of this generation’s prophets, no matter how steep and how stony the road ahead of us, “If God’s got us, then we gon’ be alright.” Thanks be to God. Amen.