

“May the Spirit of God disturb You”

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Based on Matt 10:24-39

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Sisters and brothers in Christ, good morning and happy summer solstice. I hope you are enjoying the nearly 15 hours of sunlight we experience this particular moment of the year. No excuse to get groggy during worship now!

Have you ever noticed—as you walk into worship wide awake-- the words that adorn the entrance to this sanctuary, or, the words from scripture above the main doors as you exit to the parking lot? If you haven't, take a moment to look after service. The words are this congregation's mission statement, along with a foundational verse from Matthew 28. They are good words, that lend helpful focus, and comforting promise. I'm glad they're there.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore, a professor of Theology at Vanderbilt, tells the story of walking into a different Lutheran sanctuary recently that had a sign on *its* wall that read: “May the Spirit of God Disturb you.” The story goes, that those words were posted in honor of Gertrude Lundholm, an elderly woman of the congregation who had died only the week before. It was Gertrude's practice, during the passing of the peace, to share those words, “May the spirit of God disturb you,” as she embraced her neighbor.

What did she mean in doing that? “*Many Christians,*” she had told a friend, “*seem to think that the peace of God is just about their own internal peace of mind, as if being a Christian is like being on a tranquilizer. “But God intends to stir us up, Gertrude had said, “to make us notice new things, to keep us from being complacent.”*¹

Jesus' words don't allow us to be complacent this morning. In fact, they may confuse and arouse strong feelings in us. What does Jesus mean by saying that he has come not to bring peace but a sword? To set families against one another? To demand we love him before our closest of relationships: mom/dad, son/daughter.

First, it must be stated that this is a potentially dangerous bit of religious writing. Texts like this one--with edges so sharp, words so blazing-- can either refine or kill. Notions of Christ's “righteous sword” can be heard in the justification for crusades and burning crosses in yards, for the touting of poster boards declaring divine hatred on entire groups of people. Sometimes, the gospel comes in a rough looking package; grace, through hearing the law; and the Spirit of the Lord comes not to comfort, but “disturbs us,” as Gertrude would say. We tread into such territory carefully, and with a heavy dose of humility.

Jesus is normally the one who heals the sick, blesses the children and stills the storm. Today, he is himself the impending crisis, he is the gathering storm. To follow Jesus is to

¹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice* (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2007).

walk a path of un-peace, he says, a path which could put you at odds with society, those you love the most, or at minimum make you uncomfortable.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but the sword...to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother.

Any pastor would be hard pressed to preach a 'family values' sermon from this scripture. Is Jesus really condoning disrupted families and violence here?

Two levels of context are key to interpretation: 1) In Jesus' time, 30 C.E. or so, we listen in as Jesus is addressing disciples, who already confessed faith in him, but were fearful of bearing public witness to it. To declare in the community what they had been learning in their small gatherings; to move from passive receiver to active "proclaimer" — *was* a risk. So, Jesus here is portrayed giving his followers a heads-up of probable difficulties ahead. "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they align those of his household!" If they didn't like Jesus—even crucified him for what he was bout—the disciples should brace themselves. Jesus was preparing them to stand against culture and perhaps in the line of fire for the sake of his alternate kingdom values.

2) In mid 80's C.E. the writer of Matthew was recounting Jesus words' to a community wrestling with its identity. The Jewish community no longer had a temple. Christians were figuring out what it meant that their leader died, rose, and hadn't come back yet. These distinct-but-related movements both claimed Israel's heritage. In that tense religious and political atmosphere, proclaiming faith in the risen Christ as the Messiah *was* dividing families. Matthew was trying to help his community navigate those difficult situations through the words of Jesus. Christians –he asserted via Jesus--should be prepared to love God first, for it is from there that all other love flows.

In modern America, this context can seem another world to us,: where public witness, persecution, high-stakes belief, even martyrdom were all par for the course in choosing to follow Jesus. But perhaps, as one theologian suggested, to the extent that that form of discipleship seems alien to us, therein lies a call to re-examine our own version of Christianity. Have we so tamed down this movement that it is no longer unsettling at all to be Christian, but quite comfortable? Is 'take up your cross' just a nice saying? Is being a Christian is roughly synonymous with being a sensitive, compassionate, and caring American today?

Or do we who gather in his name yet allow the Spirit of the Lord to "disturb us," disturb us even to the point of action.

If God says, 'blessed are the poor', Jesus has something to say, today, about the hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria, scrambling to find a place to put down new roots. If God says, "blessed are the meek," Jesus has something to say about those who suffer abuse, silently shrinking into less than life at the hands of their oppressors. If God says, "blessed are the peacemakers" Jesus has something to say about Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda.

Yes, Jesus has something to say to pains that are too real, and thanks be to God his words don't always come out like soft lily-petals but sometimes like a needed sharpened sword. A sharpened sword! With an edge and a power, *not to kill*, but to cut through that which divides us. **Christ carries a sword to destroy that which would separate us in sin, and he leads the charge with an alternate set of values of welcome and forgiveness, service, peace and justice seeking.** Championing these values caused such a scandal to make him called 'Beelzebul' then and any who follow them today names of their own: humanitarian, idealist, communist, dreamer, you take your pick.

We all face moments of decision, when we have to choose whether to preserve our own status quo through silence OR to endure potential ridicule, rejection, and discomfort for the sake of Christ and those he loves. These decisions are often much smaller, but more significant, than we may realize: When we refuse to laugh at racist, homophobic or chauvinistic jokes, we put ourselves in the firing line. When we stand alongside those whom others want to judge and reject, we risk being rejected and judged ourselves. When we refuse to participate in acts of violence or retribution against our "enemies" we may be seen as unpatriotic.²

God does not call us to be comfortable, but to be disciples of the one who walked the path of suffering for the sake of a kingdom with alternate values. It's too easy to shut it out, to ignore the pain that surrounds us, to feel overwhelmed at the magnitude of the suffering. When we follow Jesus, we forfeit the right to perpetual happiness and peace of mind. Apathy is perhaps the greatest sin threatening us today. For as long as others suffer, as people united with Christ, we suffer too. That is, in part, what it means to take up your cross.

I was going to hand out thumb tacks this week, to remind us of Jesus' role as the disturber of the peace, as the one who shakes us out of complacency, who gives us a pinch every time we've gotten too settled in and sleepy in our lives.

Instead, here's a challenge from a modern Lutheran saint, Mrs. Lundholm: Do one thing this week that makes you uncomfortable, for the sake of Christ. Pray for eyes to see and ears to hear what that might be. Do one thing outside of your comfort zone—that upsets your status quo, but for the sake of others. Maybe it's volunteering, getting out your checkbook, signing up to be an e-advocate, standing up against intolerance. Only you know what it is. And, as dear Gertrude would say: May the Spirit of God disturb you!

² Paraphrased from <http://sacredise.com/lectionary/2014/05/proper-7a-ordinary-12a-pentecost-2a/> (accessed 6/18/14).