

“Standing with Jesus”

Matthew 10:24 – 39

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My personal opinion on race relations in America has never been as sought-after as it has been these past few weeks. There are invitations to participate in large-group sensing sessions (virtually, of course). There are invitations to talk one-to-one behind closed doors. Emails and texts – often with attachments and links begging for a reply – are “blowing-up” my cellphone and mail queue.

Like me, maybe you’ve had such conversations with your neighbors, or with your children, or with your spouse, or with your co-workers. As I’ve participated in these conversations, what has impressed me is the *hurt* that many have suffered. It hurts to be judged by [“the color of your skin, not the content of your character.”](#)

With others, it is the *fear* that they may be *mis-understood* as they seek to *understand*. When you don’t know what you don’t know, it is hard to know where to stand, what to say, or where to begin.

You may remember from two weeks ago that I quoted the great 20th century theologian [Karl Barth](#), who said: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”

Scripture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is always relevant. What we have read today is no exception. In the passage from the Gospel According to Matthew, our Lord tells us what it means to be *His* disciple.

Generally speaking, a disciple is a follower. Today, we have other words to describe the Master-Disciple relationship: Mentor-Protégé; Master-Apprentice; and Teacher-Student. In each case, the latter aspires to be like the former, and the path that leads to this outcome is to do as the Mentor does. To do as the Master does. To do as the Teacher does.

A few years ago, my wife Jay and I visited Israel’s holy sites. We had a guide whose method was to use the ancient rabbinic method. It was the same method Jesus used with His disciples. We went everywhere together with John, our “rabbi.” We ate meals together. We walked through the ruins of ancient cities and structures together. The lessons were not in a classroom setting; the lessons were in the common occurrences of daily living. We see this dynamic time and again in the Gospels as the 12 disciples learned from Jesus in the common engagements of living.

If you and I aspire to be like Jesus, we must allow Jesus to be with us in every circumstance of our lives. So, what does it look like to be a disciple of Jesus during a pandemic; or during a season of social upheaval; or during the hard conversations about personal integrity, community civility, truth, and the Golden Rule (which the Rev. Gioele Settembrini spoke about in his sermon last week)?

Again, as I said two weeks ago, Jesus requires you and me to be as He is: Gentle, empathetic, a peacemaker, a light constantly shining, slow to anger, eager for reconciliation, going the extra mile, loving one’s neighbor – all of them, loving one’s enemies – all of them.

“[Praying] for those who persecute you, in order that you show yourselves to be [children] of your Father who is in heaven, for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

You see, the circumstance doesn't dictate our response. The audience doesn't dictate our response. The stakes at risk don't dictate our response. Yet, too often we allow exactly those things to silence our voice and to extinguish our light.

This passage of scripture contains one of what bible scholars call the "hard sayings" of Jesus: "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me." (Matthew 10: 37 – 38)

Immediately before this passage, we are confronted with another imperative of Christian discipleship: ". . . everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 10: 32 – 33).

To "confess" Jesus before men means to *stand with Jesus* against anyone who says, "Do not be merciful, do not be kind, do not forgive, do not seek reconciliation, hate those who hate you." There is no such thing as a silent "confession."

We can sin as much by the wrong that we *do* (a sin of commission), as by the good that we fail to do (a sin of omission.) [Edmund Burke](#), the late 18th century British statesman, reflected this sentiment when he said: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

The first "hard saying" is as exacting as the second: We must love Jesus above all others.

Over the years, I have had many conversations with Christians who have a problem with Jesus requiring that He come before family. The early 20th century evangelist and teacher, [Oswald Chambers](#), wrote: "[Love is the sovereign preference of one person for another. . .](#)" When I officiate a wedding, the couple before me takes a vow to "forsake all others," in other words, to put the other person first – ahead of mother, father, son, daughter, best-friend, classmate – *all others*.

It is no mistake that in the scriptures Jesus is described as the groom, and that the church – you and I – is described as His bride. In that sacred relationship – the same as in my own marriage – there is no room for competition, "hitch-hikers," or "plus-ones."

What love I have is *out of* my relationship with Jesus. This divine love is described by Paul in one of his letters to the churches – a text read often in wedding ceremonies: "*Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. . .*" (1 Corinthians 13: 4 – 8a)

This love is not a love that springs from human sentimentality. This is not a love that is concerned only with me, my, and mine. This is an inclusive love. This is a durable love. This is God's love, and it only grows in us when we prefer God above all others; and when we want what God wants above all else.

These sayings are hard to our ears and sensibilities, but it clearly outlines what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Our discipleship takes us where Jesus has already been: He was, at times, misunderstood; and, at times, so shall we. His motives and deeds were, at times, mischaracterized; and, at times, so shall our motives and deeds.

We confess Him – and all that He stands for – publicly and positively in *all* of our interactions and associations. We are not ashamed

Jesus comes to us in peace, but He is not here to bring peace to the earth. Darkness, evil, and hate will not surrender. It must be overcome. Our weapon – our sword – is the incarnate Word of God. We overcome darkness with His light. We overcome evil with His goodness. We overcome hate with His love.

This is the Gospel. Let us not be ashamed to repeat in the light what we have heard in our early morning quiet time with God. Let us not be ashamed to proclaim from whatever soap box, pulpit, podium, or platform what has been whispered in our ear by the still, small, voice of the Holy Spirit.

Let us stand with Jesus against all of the darkness that pervades our corner of the world. Let us stand, let us stand, let us stand, until hell freezes over – then stand on the ice.

Here ends the preaching of God's word. Thanks be to God.