

Matthew 10:34-42

34 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵ 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;

³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

³⁷Whoever 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; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

40 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

Not For the Faint of Heart
Reverend Joylynn Graham
08-27-17

And so we come at last to the final week of our sermon series – Brave New World. All summer long we have been grappling with what’s happening in the institutional church, and how its role is changing both socially and politically. We have attempted to discern, what is the fate of the church? Is it indeed gasping its last breath, or are we emerging into something new – something more relevant – something more responsive to the needs of our times?

I have been using Huxley’s “Brave New World” as an illustration in the series because of the uncomfortable parallels it draws with the world we occupy. In BNW, Huxley creates a futuristic world where humans are dominated and controlled through their desire for pleasure.

“What we love will ruin us,” he demonstrates, as he destroys the human race with its own ignorance, its lust for constant entertainment, its devotion to technology, and its overabundance of material goods.

Peaceful violence. A world so enslaved, it can’t even recognize it. Produce and consume. Indulge and enjoy.

No families.

No messy relationships.

No God.

And most certainly, NO religion.

Why? Because once you eliminate suffering, you don’t need God to give you comfort.

That’s a disturbing thought isn’t it? But what’s even more disturbing is how far down that path our western world has managed to stumble. Produce and consume. Indulge and enjoy. That is the mantra of capitalism, and it is the mantra of our nation.

Clever advertising creates a false misery in us, and then offers magical solutions, leading us to believe that only way to ease our suffering is through our power to purchase. Technology has produced little devices that offer us round the clock mindless entertainment. And too much stuff keeps us preoccupied and ignorant of everything around us.

Every single day, inhabitants of the free world are bombarded with subtle reminders of our civic duty to produce and consume, indulge and enjoy! Remember George W. Bush? Bless his heart! Remember how he got on TV right after 9/11 and told us to get out there and go shopping! I know I never would have thought of that...

When people are distracted by mindless entertainment and piles of stuff, they lose their will to resist. And eventually, they become so lacking in knowledge and skills that they *can’t* resist.

And this is bad news for the church. In fact, I believe it goes a long way toward explaining declining numbers. Because our faith is, at its *core*, a response to human suffering. So if we’re too numbed by our desires to even notice our suffering, then the question becomes: “am I in fact suffering?” Followed by: “Do I still need God?”

The truth is, we suffer in many ways; and we feel it. I don't believe that's ever going to change, but I've also noticed how much effort we put into not letting it show. It would be embarrassing; everyone would know I'm human and that I don't have it all together. That's kind of the underlying vibe to all of our social interaction, and I think it's one of the bigger problems with stratification in general. The closer we are to the top, the more pressure we feel to maintain the façade. And make no mistake, Americans are a lot closer to the top than we realize – all Americans.

But here's something that may surprise you. While we ponder the fate of the church here in America, the Christian faith is actually spreading and flourishing – in other parts of the world – notably, in the places where people are suffering the most. Like Africa, Latin America, even China –

And why are they suffering? Because the standard of living we enjoy in the West could not be maintained without the desperate poverty in the manufacturing centers of Asia, or the theft of resources from Africa, or the brutal military invasions of the Middle East, or the manufactured political chaos of South and Central America¹.

While Americans distract themselves with mindless entertainment and piles of stuff, corporate interests pillage and plunder other countries in order to secure more resources so that they can produce more goods, and distract more Americans through the endless cycle of production, consumption, indulgence and enjoyment.

Have any of you heard of liberation theology? Liberation theology is a Christian theology, developed mainly by Latin American Roman Catholics, that emphasizes liberation from social, political, and economic oppression as the ultimate salvation.

Most Americans don't embrace liberation theology. Most Americans have been raised on atonement theology which teaches that we are forgiven for our sins through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Atonement theology conveniently ignores the fact that Jesus spent his entire life in the company of those who were suffering the most. It ignores the fact that his whole ministry was devoted to pointing out the neglect and the abuse of some, while others got fat and happy at their expense. It ignores the fact that Jesus was a radical socio-political-revolutionary, who dreamed of a new kind of world without stratification – without injustice. A world where the lowly would be raised and the haughty struck down.

Jesus challenged the religious institution of his time, and the hard-hearted enforcement of the laws that served no one and only led to more suffering. He brought comfort to those who suffered. He fed them; he healed them, and he reassured them that God had not forgotten them – and that they mattered.

And he suffered more than anyone for his efforts.

The role of suffering in our faith cannot be ignored, or downplayed, and when we fail to acknowledge suffering, we are being disingenuous to our faith and our commitment to follow Christ.

¹ Read more at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/radicalchristianmillennial/2017/04/christianity-created-capitalism-must-now-destroy/#lpdEsDj3w201Zi6j.99>

Suffering is at the very core of our faith, not because God wants us to suffer, but because we bring so much suffering on ourselves and each other, and God wants us to stop. And this is where it gets very real. Because putting a stop to it means going up against everyone who benefits from things as they are.

Our gospel reading came as quite a shock today didn't it? And did you catch the part where Jesus tells his disciples: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matt 10:34)

There are a couple of things we need to understand about this text. The first thing is that it is not intended to justify Jesus as a warrior or promote the Christian use of violence. Jesus' use of sword is clearly metaphoric, and he goes on to explain that he's not talking about a *sword that kills*, but a sword that causes *division in relationships*.

He's pointing to a reality that many of us are becoming familiar with these days – his teachings aren't exactly popular.

His whole message can be summarized by "love God and love others," yet as simple as that sounds, it can be highly controversial. Because loving people might mean speaking out against violence being done to them. It might mean having to choose between silence or shunning.

The second thing to know about this text is that this was written as a pep talk for Christians in Matthew's time, because they were getting into trouble for the same reasons that Jesus and Paul got in trouble.

Following Jesus has always meant getting your hands dirty. When he tells us to love each other, he doesn't mean that we should love them from afar, he means that we need to get in the middle of injustice and confront the source – especially if we are the source.

Early Christians got that. They believed that God was calling each and every person to build a community where everyone has enough and all are treated with dignity and respect – regardless of who they are.

And there was pushback. Boy, was there pushback. Neighbors, friends, even family members turned them in to be flogged, or worse.

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth, 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."

Jesus did not come to bring tranquility – he came to challenge. He came to flip the tables of injustice and oppression, and to disrupt the status quo. He came to make room for those the religious elite wanted to exclude from God's table.

Our most recent election has revealed the dark side of America's problems. It has revealed a divided country: a country of special interests, a country that does not respect life, a country that has lost sight

of its mandate to protect the land, preferring instead to strip it of its resources while obliterating countless species of life.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to speak out against a system that lets millions die in the name of profit; a system that is incompatible with the Kingdom of God and must be abolished. We are called to make a stand. We are called to challenge some of our most cherished myths. We are called to take up our cross and follow him down the path of revolution and of championing the oppressed. And in so doing, we are indeed finding ourselves at odds with friends and family just like the early Christians.

But now is not the time to leave the church; now is the time to get even more serious about being the church – in the way that Jesus demonstrated. Because the church is not going anywhere – not even in America. We are being summoned like never before to follow him, to resist our own bondage to production, consumption, indulgence and enjoyment, and to use our power to free our brothers and sisters upon whose backs the weight of our consumerism is being carried. He is calling us to risk everything, to follow him all the way to the cross if need be, knowing that what we lose for his sake we shall find again, returned to us more alive than ever before.

This is the emerging church in the Brave New World of the 21st century. It is Christ's church, and you need not be afraid, because it is God, who holds your entire life--body and soul--in his hands.

Amen