

## Radical Death, Radical Connection—Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

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[Jeremiah 20:7-13](#)

[Psalm 69:7-18](#)

[Romans 6:1b-11](#)

[Matthew 10:24-39](#)

Well, here we have another heavy set of lessons from the Bible this week. If you were with us last week, you'll remember our search for the Good News amidst the Law. The Law, of course, is all those places in Scripture that show us what God expects from us, and, in the process, shows us also how short we will always fall.

And Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel again seem bleak! Jesus is warning his disciples: if you think following me is going to be a walk in the park, think again. Jesus was doing amazing things in his ministry, healing folks and casting out demons. So, those in authority who were terrified by his power accused him of being "Beelzebul," which was a slangy way of saying the lord of sickness and demons.

"Of course, he commands evil things," Jesus' detractors said, "because he is the king of evil."

So, Jesus says to his disciples: "If they think I'm the devil, what do you think they'll say about you!" It's a rough road ahead, Jesus warns, but hold onto the truth.

Everything will be revealed, everything will be leveled out in the end. And Jesus' warnings, as we read through Matthew's today is: Are you ready to suffer loss because of the road Jesus has called you to follow? Gospel, remain true. Jesus does not lead a revolution as some had hoped, Jesus is not popular in the end. Jesus is killed. And almost all his disciples desert him. The "Law" portion of this message is: Are you ready to suffer loss because of the road Jesus has called you to follow?

And the answer, I'm sure, at least at first is, "No, I'm not." Doing the right thing is never easy. Not even in the Old Testament was it easy either. This trend did not start with Jesus of Nazareth. When the prophet Jeremiah was doing his thing the drums of war were beating. Babylon was coming for Judah and Jerusalem. The people were saying, "Jeremiah, forget God! We're doomed, God has abandoned us!" And Jeremiah's response is to pray to this God. Jeremiah in our lesson this morning is talking to God. He's saying, God, why have you called me to be the voice of reason, of faith, here?

All I ever seem to be saying is, "People, look out, we are headed for death! But even when I try to be silent, I can't," Jeremiah says.

If I say, "I will not mention [God,]  
or speak any more in [God's] name,"  
then within me there is something like a burning fire  
shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot."

Jeremiah is saying: Above all else, I am connected to God—this I believe. And this is the truth I need to tell! But when I tell this truth, people don't like me. And just like Jesus' time, just like Jeremiah, just like the Psalmist too, we are entering, or we are already in, a time when it's just not that cool to be Christian.

But, in a weird way, in our time, what it even means to be Christian is totally unclear. Half the country says that to be Christian means to be born again, with believer baptism. Half the country says to be Christian means acknowledging the supremacy of the pope, Roman Catholic. Another half of the country says to be Christian means to be anti-abortion. Another half of the country says to be Christian means to be anti-capitalist. If you noticed, that doesn't add up, because all these things slice in different directions, four halves do not make one whole.

You've got liberal Catholics, and conservative Lutherans, and anarchist Evangelicals, and every other combination, on and on.... It's like everybody, across the board, says what the Psalmist is saying—

"I have become a stranger to my own kindred,  
an alien to my mother's children.  
Zeal for your house has eaten me up;  
the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me."

But let's stop and refocus for a second. In the most basic sense, to be Christian means to be Christ-like. It is not, first, a political platform—although we always will be led to ways of peace and mercy in the end. And Jesus says in Matthew, that to follow him, to be Christ-like, will mean an experience **of loss**—of "the sword," he calls it. To follow Jesus means to hold onto something so radically true that it will terrify everyone in your life.

And, are you ready? That radical truth is this: "You" have to die. You—your ego, your little self, your group, your country—is going to go away. Jesus says the more you cling, the more lost you become. "Those who find their life will lose it," Jesus teaches, "and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

This is what baptism represents. This is what baptism starts, it is, first and foremost, a death. A death to the kind of self that is inwardly focused. A death to the way of life that only seeks to be right. A death to sin.

St. Paul is preaching this radical truth when he says: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

"For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him."

This is so intense, so radical, that I think it sails over our heads. Jesus, and Jeremiah, and the Psalmist and St. Paul all are saying—there is something so true, so eternal, so near to us, that nothing else matters.

And it's not that we have to, transactionally, suffer, or reject our family, or be rejected to get to this truth. It's just there. God is just there. **Christ is just here.** It's all connected, it's all free—and that freaks us out.

Leopold and Lillian, who will be baptized today, they haven't done anything to deserve this newness of life that God offers. None of us have done anything to deserve this newness of life, the very idea of "deserving" is not part of God. God, Jesus says, made you! You already belong. "And even the hairs of your head are all counted."

And God created a ritual, a sacrament, to bestow this truth upon us. This is Good News. You belonged to God, to this truth, before you were born. This is the really Good News. But the death of the little self, dying to sin, from Jeremiah to Jesus to now, is not popular. It upsets us. It unseats and unsettles and dethrones us.

Death is part of the story—all kinds of deaths. Babylon did come and conquered Judah. Jesus was crucified. And when things fall apart for us, in one way or the other, just remember, there in your back pocket, you have got *this* real, Good News:

"We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So, you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

*Amen.*