

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

July 9, 2017

Matthew 10:24-33 (EHV) – ²⁴“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor is a servant above his master. ²⁵It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher and the servant like his master. If the master of the house was called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! ²⁶“So do not be afraid of them, because there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, and nothing hidden that will not be made known. ²⁷What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹“Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without the knowledge and consent of your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹So do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows. ³²“Everyone who confesses me before others, I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven. ³³But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

Introduction

Take just a moment or two to make a mental list of what you perceive your own talents and abilities to be. A couple Sundays ago, we installed the church councilmen who've been elected to serve us here at St. John. We've sent them forward with the Lord's official blessing to use their God-given abilities in the service of our congregation. Thinking of that mental list you've just made, where could you envision your talents being best used? What position or committee would give you the most amount of anxiety? Let's not beat around the bush... How would you feel about being a member of the Evangelism Team? Would that be the absolute last thing you'd volunteer for?

Theme: Confidently Proclaim Christ!

Sitting around some tables planning the evangelism program of our congregation or sending thank-you cards to visitors or typing names and addresses into a prospect database is one thing. Actually getting out of the car and walking up the sidewalk to the house of a complete stranger is quite another. It's potentially the scariest thing that a Christian can do. There are just so many variables – so many unknowns. What if they slam the door in my face? What if they laugh at me? What if they know more about the Bible than I do? What if I forget what I'm supposed to say? What if I can't answer one of their questions? What if a dog gets out of the house and attacks me? What if they actually invite me inside? What if not one single person is interested in what I have to say? No thanks! I'll stick with setting up or taking down communion or counting the offering or paying the church's bills or just keeping on praying for others and the work that they do.

Don't get me wrong – all those things are important works of service, using God-given talents and abilities. They're all related to the church's proclamation of the gospel in some way – either directly or indirectly. But let's just face it – by virtue of your very nature as God's people, you're all members of St. John's Evangelism Team. And in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus gives us some excellent advice: **CONFIDENTLY PROCLAIM CHRIST. Proclaim him without fearing those who oppose you. Proclaim him without fearing that the Lord has forgotten you.**

Part I: ...without fearing those who oppose you.

I think the biggest fear of those who proclaim Christ is the fear of being opposed or humiliated or persecuted. But Jesus says we don't have to fear any of those things.

The immediate context of our lesson is Jesus' sending out of the twelve apostles. He tells them where to go – to the lost sheep of Israel. And he tells them what to say – “The kingdom of heaven is near.” And he tells them that it won't always be easy work. They were going to be physically, emotionally, spiritually,

and psychologically persecuted. They were going out like sheep among wolves. But when you really think about it, this shouldn't come as any surprise.

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor is a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher and the servant like his master. If the master of the house was called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!”

All we evangelists have to do is look at how the main character of our message (Jesus) was treated. It was bad enough at the beginning of his ministry. Toward the end, it was as if he were staying just inches ahead of a pack of wild dogs intent on destroying him. Since Jesus himself experienced persecution, his disciples shouldn't expect anything better. A student / servant shouldn't expect better treatment than his teacher / master. In fact, students will seek to imitate a good teacher even if it brings criticism and disrespect.

One specific type of persecution Jesus tells us that we'll experience is name-calling. Many times he was labeled as being demon-possessed or even the devil himself, and – according to their logic – the same would be true of his disciples. It's a different era now, but that kind of opposition remains. People call us unloving, intolerant, old-fashioned, out-of-touch with reality, hypocritical, better-than-thou, and yes, even devilish because of our message. How tempting it is to avoid persecution by hiding our faith! And we've probably fallen into that temptation, haven't we? But not with our eyes focused on Jesus. Confidently proclaim Christ without fearing those who oppose you. What an honor to be treated as our Savior was!

“So do not be afraid of them, because there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, and nothing hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim from the housetops.”

The two primary characteristics of evangelists are trust and boldness. First of all, trust that the message that Jesus speaks to us in the quiet of our own church and homes is powerful and true and timeless and valid for all people of all times. Then leave the security of church and home with boldness to shout what you've learned from the rooftops, so to speak. No, don't mount speakers on your car and drive around blaring out a call to repentance. But then, don't be ashamed to speak of spiritual matters, either. Don't hesitate to strike up a conversation with the person at the break table over lunch. Instead of reading the latest best-seller on the plane, pull out your Bible and then make a comment or two to the person next to you about the real reason you're not afraid of flying. When the person behind the cash register asks you how your day's going, don't just say “OK” to be polite, but tell him or her why you're having such a blessed and wonderful day. Walk up to that stranger's door with a spring in your step because you have the best news the residents could possibly hear.

The worst thing they can do is kill you, and the chances of that happening in this country are relatively miniscule. And even if that does happen, it's only because God wants to get you to heaven that much sooner.

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

God is ultimately in control of our lives. The world tells us that if we lose our lives we've lost everything. That materialistic view causes us to hold back in our service to the Lord – to refrain from giving all for Christ – lest there be nothing left. Such fear is out of place. We disciples should instead fear God. According to the sinful nature inside each of us, we should be afraid of disobeying God's great commission. And as forgiven disciples, we'll give God awe and reverence, because Jesus saved us and will acknowledge and welcome us into the glory of heaven as his faithful disciples.

Transition

Confidently proclaim Christ without fearing those who oppose you. In addition, proclaim him confidently without fearing that the Lord has forgotten you.

Part II: ...without fearing that the Lord has forgotten you.

Besides facing opposition, evangelism is scary because many times it seems like we go at it all by ourselves. Even though we should know better, it seems like God observes our attempts at sharing the Word from a distance. If God promises to give us the words to say, why do those words so often escape us? Why do we have such limited “success”? We quickly begin to think that our efforts are in vain. A relatively small number of visitors who join us at Christmas and Easter, for the high festivals of the church year. A family lost or transferred for every one gained. Has God forgotten us here in our little corner of the world?

Jesus uses two simple illustrations to answer with a resounding “NO!” Both of them are arguments from the lesser to the greater. If God observes and cares for the lesser things, then there’s no doubt that he observes and cares for the greater things.

First of all, Jesus uses the picture of sparrows. The sparrow is a common bird. Jesus said that two of them in his day were worth a mere penny. Luke’s account even says that there must’ve been “buy four, get one free” specials – five for two cents. But no matter how insignificant, not one sparrow dies apart from will of our heavenly Father. Now the argument from the lesser to the greater: If God cares enough about sparrows to watch over their lives, won’t he certainly watch over ours? Sparrows are animals. We’re the crown of God’s creation with souls that will never cease to exist! The Lord hasn’t forgotten us and he doesn’t look upon us from a distance. His Spirit lives inside of us and he embraces us in his constant love and protection – especially when we’re persecuted for our proclamation.

The second picture Jesus uses is of human hair. Maybe a couple of you wouldn’t have too much trouble counting the hairs on your head. Most of us can’t begin to count them. And even if we could, why bother? Not only CAN God count the hairs on our heads, he DOES have them numbered. That just serves to illustrate that God’s concern for us and knowledge about us is all-inclusive. There’s no way we should ever fear that God has forgotten or abandoned us.

Especially as Judgment Day approaches, we can proclaim Christ with confidence. Our hope is well-founded and we look forward to Jesus’ imminent return when he’ll gather his flock together. No longer will we be sheep among the wolves. We’ll stand beside all those who, by grace, trust fully in Jesus for salvation. We’ll see all the fruits of our laboring.

Conclusion

It wasn’t all that long ago that there were those “No Fear” logos on t-shirts or bumper stickers. That’s our attitude too, as we proclaim Christ. There’s no fear because those who oppose us oppose the one who rules over all things. There’s no fear because our Lord has us safely in his care. So don’t hold back! As Christ’s ambassadors, proclaim him without fear. Amen.