

Sermon June 21, 2020

"Jesus' Worst-Case Scenario: Rules Become Idols"

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Grace and Peace to you in the name of God our loving Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT FIRST WORSHIP PLANS:

First of all, I wanted to say the council at First is working on a plan to worship outside this summer and that may happen soon and that's one of the reasons I am out here testing the heat in my black clergy shirt on a 80 Degree afternoon. There are still some things to work out and plan for. We'll need some more ushers who are trained in how to set up for the services and we need to make sure we can educate and communicate with members about it beforehand. We will still be offering options for worshipping at home and are testing our capabilities to livestream a service for those of you who would want to call in or view the service in real time. I'm also talking to other pastors about decisions about how we could celebrate communion together and in different locations and hope can celebrate communion again soon.

I am in dialogue with the West Allis Health Department to help us determine the risk of transmission indoors and what rooms in our church have the best ventilation. We are taking those decisions slow, because the greatest risk of transmission is when people are indoors together for an extended period of time. Basically that's what happens with all church activities and gatherings! So if we have any gatherings we would want to take precautions and have them in the safest places possible. Unfortunately, our sanctuary while it could provide good spacing does not provide good options for air circulation. So right now, it seems clear that being outside, with over 6 ft of distance and

masks is the safest option for any gatherings, but even that takes planning and preparation to keep people safe and get everybody on the same page. We'll keep you posted as the Council continues to plan and discern about this.

I know it may be frustrating to have to be reminded of worst-case scenario possibilities, but we need to have those things in mind when we make decisions as a congregation. Several ELCA churches have dealt with parishioners getting covid, being hospitalized and even dying. We can't completely eliminate the risk, no matter what we do, but we can do our best to be wise and prepare as much as possible.

SERMON

One benefit of the outdoor in person worships we are hoping to have, at least in some of your minds I'm sure, is that I will be delivering shorter sermons since we will try to keep any services together short, to reduce the risk of transmission and the time we are in the sun and weather. Today I am punishing myself with a regular length sermon to teach me to keep it short in the future!

We've had to hear a lot about worst case scenarios when it comes to the pandemic. I want to talk with you about some other worst-case scenarios today too. I got this book from a family member a few years ago called the Worst-Case Scenario Journal. It gives little guides about what you would do if you were situations that most of us would likely never find ourselves in like...

I don't think there is anything in here about how pastors can deal with a pandemic after parachuting into a new church. But I am also reminded that things could be a lot worse. We still can connect as a church, communicate and learn together and we now have technology that has connected us in a way they didn't have when churches shut down during the Spanish Flu or other

outbreaks in the past. I am grateful for what we can do and try to focus on the abundance we have rather than what is missing, and that is also one of the keys for churches to live into their mission and invite others into it. It's easy to focus on scarcity and what's missing, but our church, this church has a lot going for it, even in these times.

However, our scriptures for today, at first glance, seem to be a list of worst-case scenarios. Matthew seems to give us a litany of hardships from the mouth of Jesus. Referencing slavery, suffering, and division with authorities, even within families. Jeremiah, voices an angry protest at God, based on his worst-case scenario as a prophet, where everyone seems to be denouncing and deriding him for what God tells him to say. When he tries to keep it inside, he says "then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary for holding it in and I cannot". It sounds like he can't escape the suffering and he calls out for vengeance against those that do not listen and do this to him. In case you were hoping for relief from Paul in Romans, he continues his argument that suffering for the name of Christ is beneficial to the lives of Christians. The crack of hope, he gives us is that we are dead...but that, he argues is actually good news!

The preacher is asked, "Where is the abundance here?" "Is this really good news?" or "Can we skip to the good parts?"

Hearing Jesus say that he came not to bring peace but the sword, for most Christians is disturbing. This does not sound like the Buddy Jesus or kinder gentler Christ we often picture. What is Jesus talking about and who is Jesus talking to?

Jesus is talking to his disciples and trying to level with them that the life of his followers will not be easy. This is not going to be about ruling over others and getting vengeance on enemies. If you follow Jesus it means you are called to pick up your cross and follow him. And that means aligning with those who are being persecuted and being willing to face death for it.

But to have Jesus say he is bringing a sword and causing division, is a worst-case scenario of Jesus that seems to speak against the values we know he holds from other parts of the gospel.

This is not an easy text. It is hard to hear. But Jesus is also speaking to the disciples about the opposition that they will face. And it is not just the opposition of the powers of the Roman Empire or Jewish authorities, it is the opposition of those who are holding onto what God has said in the past in the face of God in the person of Jesus. This isn't law enforcement like we are used to. A group called the Pharisees and those that study the law of Moses are the ones who would confront Jesus at every turn and tell him he's doing it wrong.

Jesus knows these people aren't going away. He knows they are us! This word from Jesus is because he knows that the disciples then and now will be tempted to try to make a peace with those that hold the law as superior to Jesus as if they are in opposition. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law but isn't much of a rule follower so people are confused! He is not just saying "Follow the law everybody. You have everything you need already from Moses. I'm just here to remind you. I'm not really necessary. Just follow the law, ok!" Jesus instead is leaving the righteous law followers and focusing on people the law excludes, which would drive them nuts! He is telling stories, he is healing and showing that the way people are living with the law is leaving gaps that God sees. He is speaking from the heart of God and the heart of God says

that rather than start with the law, God's starts with grace. You don't earn forgiveness God wants all of his children to experience it. And that peace and reconciliation with God is what frees us and leads us to help others experience it. But to someone who has always been taught that the law is the final authority, it sounds like Jesus is preaching lawlessness and speaking out against God rather than for God. That is what gets Jesus killed, and he warns it could get his followers killed too.

But Jesus is dealing with another reality and battle too. Jesus knows that human beings prefer the law. We want to know that we earned our status with God. We want to know they are the good guys, and that others must be the bad guys, and when Jesus seems to be messing up that whole equation, we long for it!

When Jesus is speaking about bringing division, he is speaking to the reality that those who worship the law, cannot worship him fully and cannot experience grace as God intended. Jesus knows the disciples will be pulled back into that idea of moralism and law as authoritative. But that means the relationship with Jesus will become secondary. Jesus doesn't get angry often, but this is one of the issues Jesus brings a dividing line to. Either Jesus is the authority or the law is, you can't have both. Jesus fulfills the law as the living God, pointing us to the relationship with God, that the law was supposed to help us live into.

This is a question of idolatry. Of putting something or something in front of God. It speaks to human nature of wanting something tactile and in front of us that makes us feel righteous and in line with the divine. It is why the Israelites made a golden calf, when they couldn't see Moses. Moses had become their physical picture of God. His law became the curtain people hid behind from

an angry God, to show they were in the right. Even when the first law is that you shall have no other gods, people began to treat their relationship to the law, like it was their relationship with God. Jesus interprets this misstep for us so we know that the laws themselves are not God or meant to be God. When they no longer lead us to God and the loved and loving community God intends, they became a barrier.

So when the Mount Sinai descendants began to look at the laws of Moses and the other legal code that came after it, as their authority and god, rather than the relationship with a real God that was behind that curtain, it makes Jesus mad. He tells us to pay attention to that division and not fall into that trap of idolatry. It is what Paul told us last week, that we are justified by faith apart from the law.

When Jesus is crucified, God rips the curtain of the Holy of Holies, the place where Jewish people began to think God lived, as if he did not live other places. As if he was contained there. Jesus came to remind those descendants of the real loving God that is alive and wants to be in our life and world, not contained in a room, or a book, or any authority other than the one we know in Jesus.

And Jesus tells his followers that they are called to pick up their cross over this issue. That they are to speak up for their relationship with God as authoritative when others seek to find some other version of God that is more comfortable... A Jesus that fits neatly into our boxes... For Jesus this is a line in the sand.

Paul reminds us in the text from Romans this week that we die with Christ in our baptism and that means we die to those ideas of God in our lives, and the idolatry of making ourselves a God. It is so easy for us to fall into the belief we

can do it ourselves or that we are in the right because of our works and actions, rather than because God chose to forgive us and love us while we were and are sinners. And God does forgive us of this behavior but also calls us to repentance. God knows this is still our primary sin even if now it means making God an app on our phone, that we only use when we want to instead of the center of our lives every day. Even though we try to find ways to separate ourselves from the transformative and authoritative love of God in Christ Jesus, God does not allow that to happen. But he still tells us to call out those false notions of God when we see them.

This is the relationship that Jeremiah had at the heart of all his hardship. A trust and closeness to God that let him complain and fume about how hard it was to speak of this relationship with a living God. He was in a world that wanted to use God as a prop to reinforce the norms and comfort level of an earthly kingdom... and it made Jeremiah and God furious. The false prophets who were paid well and invited to the king's court said "the Temple, the Temple". Which is another way they said, "The law, the law" Which was in another way of saying, "God is on our side, so we don't need to worry or tend that relationship." The Temple and the Law became an idol instead of celebration of a relationship with a living God. Jeremiah after all the pain he shares, still celebrates that relationship at the end of his rant, saying "Sing to the Lord", for the deliverance he has given.

Paul says that we are dead to sin and this is good news. Paul says that the understanding of sin and fear of death do not need to trap believers, because Jesus has already saved us from sin and death and the devil even though they try to get their hold on us still. The walk of the disciple is to daily die to the self that wants the idol, and the self that thinks we can do it ourselves. The self that turns faith into a status that shows we are good person, rather than being in

the midst of a life changing relationship with a living God. We want the static status. The transformation call makes us nervous doesn't it?

To pick up the sword Jesus speaks of, is not to attack others. It is how the Spirit separates what belongs to the life of Christ from what belongs to the realm of death, where our fears, idolotry and temptations keep us doing stupid things. This relationship with a living God pulls us out of that pit and grave danger. This is the realignment of repentance. This is the invitation that we are invited into again and again and this is the call to speak to that truth, when others preach a different gospel. When it comes to split loyalties, Jesus brings a sword to cut out the distractions, and gives strength to speak, even if we know it will do us harm and create division. But this is the conflict, that brings peace through the relationship with God. When we don't fear death, we can speak the truth.

Jesus went there before us. Died in our place, and brought us back that real peace. The peace that gives us strength. The peace that gives us life. The peace that gives us courage to witness to a living Lord above all other gods and claims on our life. Jesus came back to the disciples after the resurrection and brought them peace. It's the peace we share together in services, not just "Nice to see you Margaret", but the peace that Jesus went to hell and back to bring to the church.

Jesus went to the worst-case scenario. He wrote the book on it. But Christ doesn't just want us to read the book, he wants to walk with us. He wants us to know live it out that life. Not life-- perfect, or life--comfortable, but life abundant with Jesus. And when Jesus is Lord of our life...When Christ walks with us.. we are ready for any challenge or scenario on the road of discipleship. Amen. Lord Jesus, keep us on the closer walk with you. Amen.