

Rev. Kimberly Glenn

In the name of God, the divine three in one, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The lectionary readings this morning might be making you squirm a bit in your seats. Jeremiah says, “O Lord... you have overpowered me.” (Jer 20:12) And “O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous!” (Jer 20:7b) Paul asks in this portion of his letter to the Romans, “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” (Rom 6:2)

I know when I first looked over these readings they made me squirm; they convicted me because day to day I am not aware of the challenges I confront when trying to live out God’s call on my life. It is an enormous task to think about the responsibility of bringing God’s ideals to fruition in the world. And so I don’t think about it. I can’t. I think I’d be paralyzed if I did. But as challenging as the task is for me and for us, it was far more challenging for first century folks who followed Jesus.

These first century followers of Jesus were a comparatively small group of people. They were overwhelmingly outnumbered by the orthodox Jews and the Greek and Roman pagans. And yet the message that Jesus brought to them was so real, so true that faithful followers were willing to take on the challenge of spreading it far and wide. They were deeply committed to sharing God’s message of love, grace, peace and

redemption with everyone they encountered. But that commitment came with risks and their sacrifices could be costly.

The words we heard in Matthew's text are fighting words, there is no question about that. They are perhaps not the kind of words you came here hoping to hear this morning. So soon after celebrating the glory of Easter and the enthusiasm of Pentecost, we aren't ready to picture Jesus wielding a sword as opposed to a shepherd's crook. Jesus said to 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." (Mt 10:34) This is surely one of the most confounding statements attributed to Jesus. A statement similar to it can be found in Luke (Lk 12:51) and a parallel statement can be found in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, which is a gospel that exists but is not included in the Bible. I mention those references to let you know that this is not a phrase that Matthew inserted for literary purposes. It most likely is something that Jesus actually said.

So why might he have said that? And why would he have said that he came to set family members against each other? Those words just sound so inconsistent with the character of Jesus that we know from the stories of healing and teaching, welcome and forgiveness.

Scholars believe, and I do too, that he said them because they were words of instruction and encouragement to his followers. Jesus knew that

his message of inclusion and mercy would offend those in power who used exclusion and punishment to maintain control. He knew that anyone who followed him would face persecution, physical harm, and maybe even death. He knew that many would resist being his follower out of fear for their livelihood if not their very lives. His disciples needed to know that Jesus had their backs, that God's hope for them was that they would hear and follow Jesus. So what they would have heard when Jesus told them he was bringing a sword and not peace is that Jesus would stand behind them as they cut through the loyalty people had to lesser ideals, lesser gods. The disciples were called to cut those bonds as if with a sword in order to allow people to find true relationship with the divine in Jesus.

In the face of persecution or worse, families were known to divide their loyalties. Many were scared to death to align themselves with Christ. Jesus said to his disciples, "one's foes will be members of one's own household."(Mt 10:36)

When one chose to follow Jesus during Jesus' earthly life, one was taking a risk. Those early disciples had to choose between staying on the farm, so to speak, or leaving everything behind. The only way to learn from Jesus was to be in his presence. There was no other way available to them. But as the movement grew, and especially after Jesus died and was resurrected, the people who held power wanted nothing more fervently

than to eliminate this threat to their perceived order and control. What they didn't fully grasp was that once this new and transformative understanding of God had been unleashed, nothing could contain it. Just as God cannot be contained in an ark, a temple, a church or in any living thing, faith in God through Christ cannot be contained either. It's out there, set loose in the world and it's contagious.

Most of us here today are disciples of Jesus or at least thinking about becoming one. The risks we face in choosing that path cannot compare to the risks posed to our ancient ancestors. As opposed to hoping to quash the concept of a merciful, loving God most governments and most people who hold power at least respect that possibility if not outright embrace it. But I'm wondering, does the lack of an opponent make our discipleship lazy? Are we less inclined to develop a robust relationship with God through Christ because we don't have to?

The thing about becoming a true disciple, that is to say a student, of Christ is that there is no end to that process. It literally never ends. In the case of Christianity, you CANNOT learn everything you need to know in Kindergarten. And the truth is, learning about Jesus and God through our scripture is not a necessity. We don't NEED to know it. But how much more full is one's life as a Christian when we commit to the journey of knowing more? I'm not trying to set a standard but you might want to

know how my learning began. It began when I was listening to the readings one day in church and realized that I could not place the reading in any context. I wanted to know what was going on around that scripture. I was EAGER to know more. So I came to discipleship through my head; I was curious. Some others come to it for that reason. But so many others come to discipleship through their hearts. They feel drawn to be in closer connection with Jesus; to feel how it is to walk with him.

I hope that you might consider it this coming fall when we offer some opportunities for adult discipleship here at St. John's. I and those on the Adult Formation team want you to journey with us to know more about Jesus and the growth of Christianity in the world. We invite you to come and listen or pose questions. We invite you to open yourself to the possibility of growing in faith.

Some of you might wonder why we no longer call these learning opportunities Sunday School but instead call it Christian Formation. One of the best reasons for that was told to me by one of my mentors at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Goochland County. My mentor's name is Rev. Christopher Brookfield. He is a brilliant man who served in the military during WWII. He went to Princeton. He went to seminary at Union in New York where one of his professors was the renowned theologian Paul Tillich. He actually went to seminary twice because the first time he wasn't sure

he'd interpreted God's call correctly. He wondered, am I really supposed to be a priest? I get that. Christopher also served on staff as an English teacher at Andover. One of his colleagues there was Frederick Buechner, another renowned theologian. One of his students was John Irving. I say all this to give you context for how seriously I took what he said during Lenten studies, in his sermons, heck, even in passing conversation. His words were like bits of gold to me; like chocolate on top of vanilla ice cream.

One day this Christopher Brookfield, a learned man and one of the best teachers I've ever known, told me that he believes that the phrases Christian Education and Sunday School are oxymorons. He believes that Christianity cannot be taught, at least not the way we teach math or reading in school. Instead he believes, and I do too, that it is important to know the stories that are the basis of our faith but that one must be transformed by them. He believes that transformation is the process of becoming Christian. I believe that process begins the moment one turns to God and opens oneself up to the transforming power of Christ.

So we don't call it Christian TRANSformation, because that depends on one's approach to the information; it depends on the degree to which we want to know more, to be more of what God has called us to be. The processes we make available in the church through study and dialogue

and community are called formation because no matter what, when you participate in them something in you is formed; shaped into more of what God wants you to be.

The gospel reading today tells us to have no fear of those who wish to tear down Christian faith. Jesus says, “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” He promises to stand with us if we acknowledge him and his truth. I invite all of you to come journey with us and learn more deeply what the truth of God in Christ is. Together we can discover how we can play a more committed role in living into that truth in our church, in our community and in our world.