June 22, 2014  
Sermon for Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Chicago, IL  
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Texts: Jeremiah 20:7–13; 
Romans 6:1b–11  
Matthew 10:24–39

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...”

Happy 2nd day of Summer & Belated Father’s Day?! Having any good vacations yet? I was just on one. Picture this: I am just coming in from a lovely day at the NC beach, when I decide to do a quick email check – BIG mistake—and find a note from Pastor Craig giving me the texts for today’s service. (Thanks for the invitation to preach on this particular Sunday, Pastor Craig!)

In any event, I come in from boogie-boarding with my son and hanging out with my spouse Alison’s parents to read this: “Whoever 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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

It was a jolt. Suddenly, having a gin & tonic didn’t seem quite right... You know, if there had been Facebook in Jesus’ time and he had posted this remark, I would bet hardly anyone would have “liked” it. I don’t like it. Do you? Does it make you want to “follow” Jesus? I mean if this is how Jesus is going to use his 150 words, he can forget Twitter. No hashtags. No tag lines.

Seriously, look at these texts that fell into my lap [pass out the printed sheets with the readings]. Did they shock you? Did they make you shift a little in the pew? What am I to do with these texts?! It is summer after all; we are supposed to be enjoying a bit of relaxation and leisure! Back at the beach, I consulted Alison’s father—who will soon be my legal father-in-law (at least in IL), who is a retired Lutheran pastor. He wisely remarked that the “true message of the Gospel is always shocking.”

Jeremiah bluntly reminds us that being a genuine prophet –speaking truth – has often meant being outcast, denounced, plotted against – even by one’s presumed “friends” (a precursor to “frenemies”?). And Matthew’s Jesus offers no false sense of security that following Christ will lead to a life of ease and harmony.

Instead, both Jeremiah and Matthew lay bare the real costs of discipleship. And in the face of them, they call us to radical trust, and yes, to obedience. It is shocking. Modern
sensibilities celebrate liberty and freedom to pursue our individual notions of happiness above calling for risk and sacrifice for the greater good. So, we have to enter these foreign worlds in order to get at the meaning of these texts.

The book of Jeremiah was written in a time of great social and religious tumult, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon and the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah tries relentlessly to offer a serious wake-up call to his fellow Judeans. As we read, they deride and denounce him. Yet, even if wants to, Jeremiah cannot keep silent. The words bubble up inside him; the pressure builds like a volcano about to erupt. He must speak the truth; he can do no other. And above all, he trusts God. Regardless of whether the people hear or not, are faithful or not, Jeremiah testifies that God is faithful to them. God will not abandon this prophet or people. God will accompany them into whatever suffering they may face, even into exile.

We now jump several centuries to Matthew’s Gospel, to about 90 years after Jesus’ crucifixion. Jews and Christians were not so distinct from one another. Even more, it was not easy or safe to identify with either or both of these constituencies. The Roman Empire wielded an iron fist and destroyed the second temple during Matthew’s time.

Indeed, the writer of Matthew knows from experience that there is significant risk and cost in being a follower of the risen Christ. Doing so did tear families apart. You would likely be mocked or abused. You could even find yourself fodder for lions or gladiators in a coliseum. Your house church might be raided. You were taxed heavily. Women had little or no public voice or power.

If it is hard to imagine that kind of world, think about how the conflicting beliefs embedded in the Civil War tore families apart. Or the risks women have taken and still take—jail, violation—for fighting for the right to vote or to get an education. Or picture armed police forces, tear gas, and dogs threatening people standing up for civil and human rights, whether in Selma, Alabama, Tiananmen Square, Cairo, Damascus, or along the proposed Keystone XL pipeline route. To paraphrase Paul in his letter to the Romans, if we claim the resurrection in Christ, then our lives should look different than they would otherwise. Being a true disciple means saying no to certain ways of life (living only for ourselves) and saying yes to others. The camp song, “They will Know We are Christians by our Love,” comes to mind.

Standing up for what we hold dear and claim as true is not without cost and yet is so worth it. Martin Luther knew this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew this. As did Sojourner Truth, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, Harvey Milk, Nelson Mandela and literally millions of others who have stood—and who stand—with life-giving social movements and religious reformations to bring about change, but whose names have not made it into Wikipedia. There is so much I want to say about these people and efforts, especially highlighting Luther and Bonhoeffer—key sources of our theological and ethical inheritance, but doing so would turn a homily into a lecture. So, instead I placed a few of my favorite books in the back for you to peruse—feel free to note titles and topics of interest—ideas for summer reading! For now, suffice
it to say that anthropologist Margret Mead had it right in her often-quoted remark: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

Yet, what Mead may not understand is that we don’t do it on our own. Indeed, there is a second, strong theme in these texts this morning that we dare not miss.

Along with the call to risk and to discipleship, God in Christ promises—again and again—that God is and will be with us, in whatever we face. Listen again to Matthew: God counts every hair on every one of our heads. We are worth more than many sparrows. In doing our best to follow Jesus, we will find our lives! In taking this bold risk, God promises that we will experience profound meaning, friendship, peace, grace and that these resources will carry us through the most difficult times, which—whatever form they take—are inevitable.

“Trust God; Do not fear”—whispers Jeremiah, Matthew, Luther, Bonheoffer, Martin Luther King, Sojourner Truth, along with a cloud of witnesses, both past and present.

Indeed here is the most shocking truth of all—one that I try to dare myself into believing anew every day: God loves you/me. You/I are enough. You/I do not need to worry endlessly about our futures/destiny; God already has that secured. And because God has our backs, you and I are free to love others; to stand with those who are on the underside of power; to struggle for justice; to advocate for the earth, to embody grace and compassion for those bereft of hope. Do not be afraid. Risk love. We can stand a little taller. You are not alone—especially in the most painful or scary moments of your lives, and even against great odds.

You see, we do not merely read history; we are living it, right now! This is our moment! And this world—our world—aches for our time, talents, hope, grit, and imagination. There are tough fights worth fighting—climate change, poverty, mass incarceration, education inequality, gun violence, immigration reform, to name a few. I don’t know what issues you feel called to—that is what you must reflect on—what risks and challenges you feel called to address. But I do know that all of us are called to do something—in keeping with our particular talents and abilities—to take on some of the weighty questions and problems facing us in this moment, in our history.

And to enter the fray, we have to remember that God loves us—and those with whom we disagree. And we have to cultivate in our bones the deep knowledge that with God—and with each other—we can realize more good than we think.

But to do so, we first we have to stop counting the hairs on our own heads, or looking for grey (not that I do that!). We have to stop wringing our hands so that we can take the hand of another. We have to get out of bed and open our doors and dare to look for the possibility in this day before us.
How do we do this? I don’t know exactly. So let’s do what we are called to do in such moments. Please pray with me this Holden Village prayer:

“Lord God,
you have called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”