

Proper 20 (25) 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - September 22, 2024

1 Samuel 1:19–28; Canticle of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10); 1 Corinthians 3:1–9; Matthew 10:34–39

“You’re confusing us, Jesus...”

1. You’ve probably heard that doctors make a distinctive vow: “First do no harm”
  - a. Medical schools ask their graduates to pledge the Hippocratic Oath. But that phrase is actually not there. <https://students.med.psu.edu/md-students/oath/#:~:text=I%20shall%20work%20with%20my,to%20each%20of%20my%20patients.>
  - b. That phrase is another place where Hippocrates does say it.
    - i. "The physician must be able to tell the antecedents, know the present, and foretell the future — must mediate these things, and have two special objects in view with regard to disease, namely, to do good or to do no harm." <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/first-do-no-harm-201510138421#:~:text=Wrong,.the%20Hippocratic%20Oath%20at%20all.>
  - c. But what about surgery, then?
    - i. If it’s “first do no harm” there would be no way to justify cutting into the patient
    - ii. Or if it’s “first do no harm” if there are risks to medication for simple conditions, there would be no incentive to give it a try.
    - iii. Church member Johanna Anderson, who is currently on her medical internship in Germany, is going through the general surgery rotation right now
      1. I asked her about this, and she tells me the prospect of cutting into someone, of touching their aorta, of removing a sick organ, is all initially overwhelming. Their lives are in my hands!!
      2. But that fear fades more and more as you get experience, which makes sense to me.
      3. It’s not that a doctor becomes desensitized, but they must be so focused on the technical aspects to overcome the very human desire not to harm someone.
  - d. There are obviously a lot of ethical questions that arise when caring for a patient, and doctors go through the medical and ethical training to address them, or at least to prepare the physician to make the right decisions following the wishes of the patient.
    - i. You may be remembering those kinds of conversations you’ve had with your own doctors
    - ii. You weighed the benefits and risks
    - iii. You made a decision, and maybe that decision did lead to them cutting into you in surgery.
    - iv. For days afterwards you looked at that incision, whether it had sutures or staples or glue, and it was both a reminder of the medical problem (hopefully now fixed) and the future that awaited you (with that scar as a reminder of a scary moment in your life)
2. If we were to transpose that phrase by Hippocrates to what an oath for being a Christian would be, we could turn into “First love God and one another”

- a. Here I'm referencing a passage in the gospels when Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is. Jesus replies (and I paraphrase)
  - i. Love God with your whole being
  - ii. Love your neighbor as yourself
- b. That all sounds right to our ears.
  - i. It places God first on the list
  - ii. It asks us to love our neighbor, thus creating and strengthening community
  - iii. This makes for a sense of faithfulness which isn't just about me and God, but also about us as a community which loves, which looks out for each other with the same tenacity we use to look after ourselves.
- c. But then we get to today's gospel passage
  - i. Jesus says he's not here to bring peace! Instead, he compares himself and his message to a sword, a weapon of war whose only purpose is to kill.
  - ii. Um, Jesus, that's confusing!
  - iii. And we read on, and we see that Jesus is anticipating that there would be conflict in the midst of families!
  - iv. In fact, Jesus says, relationships between father and son, mother and daughter will be cut.
  - v. It's painful to hear it! It feels discouraging! Why would I want to follow Jesus if it's going to mean conflict with my parents?
- d. There is more than meets the eye here.
  - i. You will remember from Pastor Tony's sermon last week
    - 1. that in the time of Jesus the people lived under foreign Roman occupation, and they saw themselves with a distinct tension:
    - 2. do what Rome says or pay the price (and it could mean lose your freedom or your life)
  - ii. Well, Jesus was trying the patience of the established religious authorities and of Rome
    - 1. Jesus was breaking with societal norms (for example, he freely interacted with people of all social levels, and interacted with people whose diseases would have made them outcasts)
    - 2. Jesus was teaching a new perspective on the scriptures which called into question so many of the assumptions of people of faith
    - 3. And Jesus was speaking at times like he represented a new kind of kingdom, a new concept of who people were as people of God, and here this was getting the attention of the Romans
    - 4. The Romans were experienced in putting down anything that smelled remotely like a rebellion
    - 5. And they had a very specific tool to execute the rebels: the cross
  - iii. So, here we are, well before Jesus is making his way to his crucifixion, and tensions are building in the community because of his message and his way of redefining community.
    - 1. And families were feeling the strain of what it meant for one of their family members to follow Jesus seriously

2. Jesus was interrupting some of the expected lines of loyalty and putting them on a collision course with Rome
  3. It feels odd to say that following Jesus was getting kids in trouble with their parents, and vice versa but that is essentially what was happening
  4. And in a twist that feels so terribly wicked, the religious institutions and the occupying forces were then placing incredible pressure on those parents, on those city leaders, to get their people under control, or to turn them in
  5. The parents were put in the middle, being asked to choose: either get your kids in line, or you AND they pay for it.
- e. No wonder Jesus says he's bringing the sword.
- i. His actions are cutting into the community,
  - ii. Only, what Jesus' sword was doing was exposing the tumor of idolatry, of injustice, of greed.
  - iii. Well, Rome wasn't interested in that!
3. It may feel confusing for Jesus to emphasize the sword in talking about the impact of his words, but it makes the point that following Jesus means taking a side.
- a. Either occupying Rome, or God's reign
  - b. A few weeks ago, we had the blessing of having Jake Brooks teach two Sunday school classes on the nature of Christian Nationalism, and how it is trying to deceive people into thinking they're following Jesus, when in fact they end up working against the principles Jesus taught
    - i. Christian Nationalism isn't new, nor is it uniquely American.
    - ii. Basically, Christian Nationalism here takes the concept of being Christian and makes it one and the same in definition as being an American.
    - iii. And, I would argue, it elevates the national identity (being an American) above that of being a Christian.
    - iv. A clear example comes from the 1960s desegregation, civil rights battles
      1. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was teaching that God says all people are equal, no matter their race, and deserve equal rights.
      2. But the government was protecting segregation with racist policies dating back to times of slavery.
      3. MLK, a Christian minister marching alongside people of different faiths, was targeted, harassed, jailed, physically attacked, all by the government, and ultimately assassinated by a sympathizer
      4. MLK was maligned as an outsider agitator, as anti-American!
    - v. So, beware, ask lots of questions, when you see someone presenting the images of religion and country together so tightly you can't cut them apart.
      1. You may have spotted a bumper sticker on a car with a cross painted with or wrapped in an American flag, for example
      2. Or in history books may have read the idea that God gave this new country of the United States all land here – with permission to push out or kill anyone who happened to be here first.

4. Some who have faith in Jesus but want to control how others believe will narrowly interpret what being Christian means (Christian nationalism, for example) and call everyone else a heretic or a traitor. But for you and me, always first look to the clear line Jesus draws, or the cut his sword makes, and how Jesus teaches with consistency and openness about loyalty to God first and foremost: love God, love one another, love yourself.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12/commentary-on-matthew-1024-39-5>

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