

**FAITH AIN'T FOR SISSIES**  
**THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 7**  
**JUNE 25, 2017**  
BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN  
CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

**COLLECT OF THE DAY**

Teach us, good Lord God, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not to ask for reward, except that of knowing that we do your will, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

**JEREMIAH 20:7-13**

Lord, you enticed me, and I was taken in. You were too strong for me, and you prevailed. Now I'm laughed at all the time; everyone mocks me. Every time I open my mouth, I cry out and say, "Violence and destruction!" The Lord's word has brought me nothing but insult and injury, constantly.

I thought, I'll forget him; I'll no longer speak in his name. But there's an intense fire in my heart, trapped in my bones. I'm drained trying to contain it; I'm unable to do it. I hear many whispering—"Panic Lurks Everywhere!—proclaim, yes, let's proclaim it ourselves!"

All my friends are waiting for me to stumble: "Perhaps he can be enticed. Then we'll prevail against him and get our revenge on him!" But the Lord is with me like a strong defender. Therefore, my oppressors will stumble and not prevail. They will be disgraced by their own failures. Their dishonor will never be forgotten.

The Lord of heavenly forces tests the righteous and discerns the heart and the mind. Let me see your retribution upon them, for I have committed my case to you. Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord, for he has rescued the needy from the clutches of evildoers.

**PSALM 69:8-11**

Surely, for your sake have I suffered reproach, and shame has covered my face.

**I have become a stranger to my own kindred, an alien to my mother's children.**

Zeal for your house has eaten me up; the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me.

**I humbled myself with fasting, but that was turned to my reproach.**

Answer me, O LORD, for your love is kind; in your great compassion, turn to me."

**"Hide not your face from your servant; be swift and answer me, for I am in distress.**

Draw near to me and redeem me; because of my enemies deliver me.

**PHILIPPIANS 1:12-20**

Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that the things that have happened to me have actually advanced the gospel. The whole Praetorian Guard and everyone else knows that I'm in prison for Christ. Most of the brothers and sisters have had more confidence through the Lord to speak the word boldly and bravely because of my jail time. Some certainly preach Christ with jealous and competitive motives, but others preach with good motives. They are motivated by love, because they know that I'm put here to give a defense of the gospel; the others preach Christ because of their selfish ambition. They are insincere, hoping to cause me more pain while I'm in prison.

What do I think about this? Just this: since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad. I'm glad because I know that this will result in my release through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is my expectation and hope that I won't be put to shame in anything. Rather, I hope with daring courage that Christ's greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die

**MATTHEW 10:24-39**

"Disciples aren't greater than their teacher, and slaves aren't greater than their master. It's enough for disciples to be like their teacher and slaves like their master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, it's certain that they will call the members of his household by even worse names.

"Therefore, don't be afraid of those people because nothing is hidden that won't be revealed, and nothing secret that won't be brought out into the open. What I say to you in the darkness, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, announce from the rooftops. Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but can't kill the soul. Instead, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Aren't two

sparrows sold for a small coin? But not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father knowing about it already. Even the hairs of your head are all counted. Don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.

"Therefore, everyone who acknowledges me before people, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven. But everyone who denies me before people, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

"Don't think that I've come to bring peace to the earth. I haven't come to bring peace but a sword. I've come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. People's enemies are members of their own households.[a]

"Those who love father or mother more than me aren't worthy of me. Those who love son or daughter more than me aren't worthy of me. Those who don't pick up their crosses and follow me aren't worthy of me. Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them.

Song of the Day: *Rise Up, O Saints of God!*

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Faith ain't for sissies.

We squirm in our seats when we hear gospel readings like today's.

Swords, division, judgment, even hell. Is Jesus *threatening* us?

We much prefer to hear gentle messages of hope.

What if I were to tell you it IS a message of hope? But it ain't for sissies.

Let's put it in context, both in the Bible and in history.

First, pull out your Bibles and find Chapter 4 of Matthew.

We're going to fly through this, looking only at those bold headings for now.

Ch. 4 begins with the *Temptation of Jesus*, where the devil offers Jesus worldly power and glory if Jesus will serve him.

The devil's life is a life focused on the business of getting and having.

To get power and glory in this world means grabbing for yourself, getting what you want without any regard for others, especially for the last, the least, the lost and the lonely, the helpless, the hapless, the homeless and the hopeless.

Pffffft. They can't do a thing for you. They are worthless to you, so there is no need to do anything of worth for them.

But, Jesus tells the devil to go away, and he begins his public ministry.

He calls the disciples, and ministers to crowds of people.

In Ch. 5, he begins teaching the core values of the Reign of God in the Sermon on the Mount, a Reign which is in the business of God's justice and peace, light and forgiveness, loyalty and dignity, and loving our enemies.

Ch. 6 continues the teaching of the sermon, concerning generosity, prayer, fasting, trust, peace of mind – not worrying, not afraid, but striving for the Kingdom.

Ch. 7 is the last part of the sermon, featuring ethics based on the Golden Rule, doing to others as you would have them do to you. By the way, some version of the Golden Rule is part of every major world religion.

In Ch. 8, the sermon is over and it's back to healing, stilling a storm, more healing, both of Jews and Gentiles, and in Chapter 9, Jesus welcomes a notorious sinner, Matthew, and even raises a girl from the dead.

At the end of Chapter 9, the focus begins to shift from Jesus' works to what his followers, his disciples are to do.

Now, I can imagine that after 6 chapters of healing and other great stuff, there are a lot of folks clamoring to get on board with this miracle man.

Jesus chooses 12, and sets them on their mission.

He gives them impressive authority over demons, disease and death. Woot!

Then Jesus says, "But, wait. Faith ain't for sissies."

He tells them about expecting persecutions if they go out on this ministry.

We soon get to the part of the chapter with today's reading,  
warning about swords, division, judgment, even hell.

Say, what? Where did THAT come from? That's not what we signed up for, Jesus.

That's where historical context comes in: The Gospel of Matthew was written  
some 40 years AFTER the life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

At this time, in the late 60s, the very same groups that tried to stop Jesus and his ministry  
40 years earlier were now trying to stop his followers because, like Jesus,  
his disciples challenged the status quo, they challenged the religious system that taught  
that if you're rich and powerful it's proof God favors you,  
and the political system that insists that might makes right.

So it made sense for the rich and powerful to shut these Christians up.

The Jewish authorities, the priests, scribes and Pharisees, shamed and humiliated  
Jewish Christians, banning them from their community, demanding other Jews shun them,  
which meant your faith put you at risk of losing your family, your business,  
your entire social network. This division in families was the actual devastating reality  
for many Gentiles, but especially for Jews, who were listening to this Gospel.

In addition to the religious troubles Christians were having, in the late 60s  
the Romans authorities were beginning to persecute them, too,  
because they did not worship Caesar, which was the state religion.

Never forget that Jesus was crucified for treason, for being a king who rivaled Caesar.

Indeed, the primary Christian Creed was both blasphemy and treason.

The very first creed wasn't about God from God and light from light, it was "Jesus is Lord."

Every time a Christian said it, it challenged the Jewish leaders'  
tidy self-affirming theology that equated status and wealth with God's favor,  
and it flew in the face of the Roman assertion that Caesar was a god.

Both groups saw Christians as troublemakers who must be stopped.

So this Gospel is written to encourage people who are bucking two systems  
as they set about to do the work of Jesus, the one they proclaimed as the Messiah of God.

Remember what that Messiah's work is, back through those 6 chapters?

What we heard last week: Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

And, don't seek money and power. In other words: care for others, not yourself.

Bring life and hope to the despairing. Welcome the untouchables.

Help people wrestling with demons.

God has been generous with you, be generous with others.

At the time when this Gospel is being written there was no worldly power or glory  
that came from having faith in Jesus. In fact, this faith could cost you dearly.

It could, like with Jesus, cost you everything.

It cost Paul, who was in a Roman prison for proclaiming Jesus as Lord,  
and who was beheaded under Nero, another Caesar. Faith ain't for sissies.

How is this Gospel passage a word of hope? I suppose it all depends on what we hope for.

To those of us who hope for personal security, for status, for an easy life,  
whose primary concern is peace for number one; who feather our own nests,  
whose faith is about saving our own sorry behind, we've clean gone  
and missed the point of faith in a God who gave absolutely everything to heal the world.

Yes, we may get what we hope for now, but our Father in heaven is paying attention  
to what we do with the resources we're given.

If God were to ask us about that, what would we say?

But, to those who of us who hope for a world where Jesus is indeed Lord,  
 where no one hungers or thirsts, where the needy are rescued from the clutches of evildoers,  
 where people are free, not only from imprisonment in jails  
 but the deadly captivity of oppressive social systems,  
 who yearn for the Spirit's help to be free of personal demons,  
 this is a word of encouragement: we're doing God's work.

We are becoming more like our teacher, our master,  
 giving our lives to do what he did and serve whom he served.

If this is our hope, what we will find is that in losing our life, we will find even more:  
 more joy, more purpose, more hope, more courage.

Paul, in his prison, has such this joy, purpose, hope and courage,  
 that he is able to bless the work of other Christians,  
 even those who have caused him pain. *That's* a life worth finding.

That's the kind of life I'm talking about when I say:  
 you don't have to be a Christian, you GET to be one.

What amazes me about scripture time and again is how what was written 2,000 years ago  
 still applies today: The Gospel speaks of the sword of Jesus, of the conflict between  
 two kinds of hopes, two sets of values, two ways of living – for self, or for the common good,  
 and this conflict is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, isn't it?

Or, at least, until Christ comes to rule all in all.

This passage is not a threat, but an invitation to proclaim and live with Jesus truly as our Lord,  
 not just of our Sundays, but our Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays  
 and Saturdays; as Lord not just of our religious time but our everyday time:

our marriages and friendships, our thoughts, what we write and what we say  
 (did you know that it is actually possible  
 to NOT utter everything that pops into our heads?), our wallets and TV remotes.

See this as a passage as a time for us, saints and sinners through the eons,  
 to ask ourselves what we want most, what our core values are,  
 what we want to give our lives to and for.

Is it "the one who dies with the most toys wins,"  
 or is it "the one who picks up the cross lives most fully."?

Rise up, beloved, and be people of faith in this Way of the Cross.

It ain't for sissies, but it is the way of the love that is saving us all.

Let us rise up, beloved, saints of God, and sing for our lives.

*Rise Up, O Saints of God!*

*text by Norman O. Forness, b. 1936*

Rise up, O saints of God! From vain ambitions turn;  
 Christ rose triumphant that your hearts with nobler zeal might burn.

Speak out, O saints of God! Despair engulfs earth's frame;  
 as heirs of God's baptismal grace, the word of hope proclaim.

Rise up, O saints of God! The kingdom's task embrace;  
 redress sin's cruel consequence; give justice larger place.

Give heed, O saints of God! Creation cries in pain;  
 stretch forth your hand of healing now, with love the weak sustain.

Commit your hearts to seek the paths which Christ has trod;  
 and, quickened by the Spirit's pow'r, rise up, O saints of God!