

July 2, 2017

Rev. Sally May

First Congregational Church of Burlington, UCC

Matthew 10: 24-42

²⁴ “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵ it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

²⁶ “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³² “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
³⁶ and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

³⁷ 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; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

⁴⁰ “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.
⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;
⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

"Be Not Afraid"

July 2, 2017

Rev. Sally May

First Congregational Church of Burlington, UCC

For those who weren't here on June 18th, my sermon was based from the Gospel of Matthew's writings just before this - a text that talked about curing the sick, casting out demons, and that like Jesus and the disciples, you - individually and as a community of faith are the miracle. Clearly, though, as we just heard, Jesus had more to say than that. And, yes, it's not very pretty is it. I read and re-read and studied today's passage and saw four themes.

The first is about fear, what not to be afraid of. In the first paragraph., I read Jesus to be saying - trust what you know, speak the truth, and do not fear those in power. The author wrote that Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." How many times have you wanted to speak up but were afraid? Afraid of what someone might say or do in response? A fear for your physical safety. A fear of repercussion from your employer or your government or your neighbor, or family member, or even a Facebook friend?

In our clergy lectionary group the subject of "fear of scarcity" recently came up, and I think that idea fits into many of our fears as well. Pundits and politicians often use words to scare us. To make us think that there is not enough to go around. The current healthcare bill - there's not enough money to be sure everyone has access to quality healthcare. The current ban from Muslim nations. And limiting of the number of refugees that come into our country are all rooted in fear. The inhumanity at our Southern Border is rooted in fear. How many times have you heard the argument that these men and women will take away our jobs, will drain resources for our school and other public systems - fear of scarcity - when it has been evident that the jobs that these people take are jobs that need to be done, help the economy, and ones most of the rest of us will not do. Our current national political situation - on all sides -there is plenty of blame to go around is more rooted in fear than in hope; in choosing sides and stonewalling than collaboration, in building consensus and a sense of community.

In this text Jesus also says "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light." This says to me that we are to let our faith, the teachings of Jesus give us both courage and voice to speak the truth to power; to recognize the abundance of resources, of compassion, of grace that is available, and to dispel unwarranted fear that not only causes fearful stress and harmful resentment, it allows us to dehumanize, oppress, and yes, kill, other human beings and nature with perceived immunity. Yet, the next theme, I think, helps us to recognize our false perceptions of security

and safety can be dangerous to ourselves and to others, and we need to be aware that sometimes we must take a stand. We must see it as it truly is and then speak it as we see it.

The second theme offers us to consider resistance as a means of discipleship. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword." One comment I heard in sharing this with someone was "That doesn't sound like Jesus." I am not so sure about that. It reminded me of a blog my daughter, Page, posted several years ago. Full disclosure: I first shared this in 2014 in a sermon titled "The Power of Fear." Page's insight and words have stayed with me, haunted me in some ways. They have helped me many times to recognize that wanting the world to be a certain way, does not make it so. Allaying our own fears so as to protect ourselves is not always right or just. I find her reflections to be a reflection of this second theme in today's Gospel reading. I am sharing excerpts of Page's blog, a reflection of her witness and experiences at a rally in St. Louis on 10/11/14 after the murder of Michael Brown. It is only excerpts but have tried to honor her writing.

I am still processing my thoughts on the brief time I spent in St. Louis. I was deeply moved by the energy, love, and intensity of the protestors, particularly the many young people leading the march.

After the rally, a White Missourian approached me asking what I thought. We shared enthusiasm for the day's events but our conversation ended when she said she "only hopes it stays peaceful...that some people have broken windows and started looting...which ruins it for everyone and takes away from the whole thing." When I returned to Chicago, I tried to stay updated by following #FergusonOctober. I found myself similarly frustrated by the pattern of outrage over the police using such excessive force on "peaceful protestors."

There is nothing peaceful about having to fight for your people's lives and nothing surprising about police violence against Black people. This White, liberal, insistence on "peaceful protest" and what qualifies as such is at best misunderstanding and at worst inherently antagonistic to Black struggle.

As the rally gathered near the St. Louis county courthouse, we encircled a large fountain. Apparently, the city regularly dyes the water different colors. On the day of the rally, it happened to be red.

As I think back to that moment- standing next to the blood-red waters, surrounded by thousands of others, and countless signs declaring "Black Lives Matter"- there are many words that come to mind to describe how it felt: inspiring, loving, heartbreaking, celebratory, cathartic, hopeful, affirming, youthful...

Peaceful is not one of them.

I repeat, there is nothing peaceful about fighting for your people's lives. Black people have never been allowed peace in America- we are positioned as the embodiment of its antithesis.

Remember, we were never meant to survive. And as awful a truth that is for me to believe, it also gives me some hope. For not only are we still here, but we continue to know and speak that our lives matter. The open celebration and love of Black life- in Ferguson and across the country- will keep me in the struggle.¹

Now I had never thought about violence, or peace for that matter, in this way. Fear of being denied full humanity is more powerful than the fear of arrest, imprisonment, or bodily harm.

Does not "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" acknowledge the need to challenge the status quo? To see the world differently and thus respond differently? Jesus is telling the disciples that fear for their own lives, and us as disciples, our own lives, must not impede our seeking the kingdom of heaven on earth, not doing God's will, not living in right relationship with all of creation, not healing the sick, not caring for the widow, the poor, and the orphan, not welcoming all into our midst, not offering cups of water to the children - not just children, but all of those who are most vulnerable among us.

The third theme challenges us to consider what family means, who family is, and how our relationships help or impede our ability to be faithful to our call. As some of you know, I know a little something about this. It has been difficult. In fact, this passage was one that kept coming into my mind when I first had the call to pursue ordained ministry. And while I like to think I have been able to, mostly, balance my ministry, my family, my faith, I KNOW I am not has dedicated to my faith as I probably should be. And it is an ongoing struggle for me and my family. Page is an example as well - her passion is helping her people, freeing them from bondage and those are the ones who are now her family in Chicago of Chicago. At some level Page has left her family. She has had to, and I miss her terribly. AND I am so proud and I know she is doing the work more of us need to do. She is an example and a witness to me, her mother, of what it is to be not afraid, to proclaim what is whispered from the housetops.

¹ May, Page, "From St. Louis: On Peace & Protest," <http://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/2014/10/16/guest-post-from-st-louis-on-peace-protest-by-page-may/> (accessed 11/15/14).

Theme # 4: Extravagant welcome. A little back story: As I was preparing for worship on June 18th worship Carrie shared with me that it was "refugee week." I immediately decided I wasn't going to go there. In part because I believe every day is refugee day for someone somewhere. But I also know that in my 2 ½ years among you I have pushed boundaries for I decided I wasn't going to do that anymore. (Yeah, today's text kinda changed that didn't it. Yeah, Never say never. You're right.). Yes, so when I read these two texts in tandem with the one from the 18th and to have a better understanding of what Jesus is offering in his words here, and I could not dismiss the power of fear in our politics and public discourse, in our attitudes and behaviors towards others and one another. They are both behaviors and attitudes that are unwelcome, can be violent and destructive. I frankly find it a bit ironic that this came up to be read this Independence Day weekend - I do remember it is Independence Day weekend and celebrate America, and we are celebrating America. We are a nation of immigrants. We are a nation of laws rooted in the ideal of the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness for all. We have a long way to go and today's text teaches me, reminds me, that welcoming all - including and accepting whoever you are or wherever you may be on life's journey is not always easy, is not always pretty, and can be cause for one to fear. Yet, today's Gospel reading is testimony that our faith in God, our trust in the life and teachings of Jesus require our voices, our actions, in spite of our fears that we may truly welcome and be welcoming to all - including the most vulnerable - and to offer cups of water - water as an element that nurtures and sustains all of life.

In the spirit of this sermon, in the spirit of the Gospel of Matthew, and in the spirit of Independence Day weekend it seems right and good and appropriate to share with you the poem "New Colossus." This poem, as you may all know, is on a plaque installed on the base of the statue of liberty. It was written by Emma Lazarus on 11/2/1883 and was actually written as a fundraiser for the base of the Statue of Liberty. May her words remind us all that as a nation, in the past we have both welcomed and been welcome; we can do it again; there is enough for everyone in this land of abundance; and you, this body of Christ is one of the miracles called to hear God's truth and speak that truth to power, in the public square, and be not afraid.

*"Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, with conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand a mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand glows
world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she with silent lips. "Give me your tired, your
poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

May it be so.