

Second Sunday After Pentecost
June 22, 2014
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We have hit the summer, and most if not all of your kids are out of school. Graduation pictures are all over my Facebook newsfeed. The pool at my apartment complex has opened, and I'm debating how to best accomplish the goal of getting swim training done without getting horribly sunburned or kicked in the head by one of the many kids playing this summer away at the pool. In summer, we expect our greatest challenges to be around how we manage our playtime and our family time, changing up our yearly rhythm.

I often wonder why those who chose the lectionary give us readings like those we have today. We don't expect to come to church and face prophets who shove us out of our comfort zone. The reading itself is also truncated oddly: the typical reaction to this is to wonder "What the heck is Matthew talking about?", and because we have no closure, to tune it out and allow it to recede into the shadowy dimness of our memory. "How was church?" someone might ask you later. "Oh, fine," you'll say, your subconscious repressing the part where Jesus declared that he had come to bring division to the earth, to roil families and disturb our lives. Our brains will insulate us from this discomfort and help us find what we are looking for—that transcendent moment when God is present that we actually come to church looking for in the first place.

Let's focus on the Gospel today. I wonder if I would stop to listen to Jesus speak, when he speaks of violence and destruction. This is exactly the sort of diatribe that attracted the attention of the authorities and got him killed. I don't expect my religion to be quite so discomfiting. In these bright humid days, I have enough troubles. I feel a sense of fear and worry when I read about fracking, the melting ice caps, the debt troubles in our society including sky-high student loans that prevent many from owning homes. I remember hearing in grade school about global warming and melting ice caps, and I am both frightened and annoyed to have arrived in a world where these things are happening, and were set in motion long before I was ever old enough to have any power to affect it. I am quite sure that each of you comes here today with your own burden of worries and fears, and most of us want to come to church with the hopes that our faith can offer us peace and comfort. Whatever we are looking for, this gospel isn't really it. I wouldn't be surprised if you are hoping this is a short sermon, or doodling on your bulletin, or daydreaming of your shopping list. Today's gospel is about as comfortable as a dental cleaning.

The violence in the reading troubles me. Jesus focuses on how he has not come to bring peace. He seems to set up this world where we must fight for our faith, and woe to you if you falter—your punishment would be that Jesus himself will deny you at the crucial moment that you approach the Great Throne. High stakes, no? I hope that your grocery list includes instigating and creating division, or else you risk

eternal denial. For us, here in today's church, we are balancing both the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule: Honor your family and Do Unto Others. This reading seems to fly in the face of that, telling us to deny everyone else's comfort and security in order to proclaim something that isn't even clearly stated in this Gospel.

Are we confused yet? I imagine so. We get a strange clip of the text today. This would have been confusing to Jesus' followers, as well. What does Jesus actually want them to do? For so long, the Jews expected that the Messiah would usher in a Jewish state and bring about peace and a situation in which, of course, the Jews were in control. As Roman rule grew in power, some sects such as the Zealots (whose number likely included Judas, he of 30 silver coins for betraying Jesus fame) taught that the Messiah would be a warrior. Finally, with speeches like this, the Zealots were starting to hear what they expected. But Jesus' actions would not match up with his words. God's kingdom was not going to look anything like this reading, and in our world, many of the skeptics will point out that texts like this have inspired many of the martyrs and much of the violence in our world. It's okay to disrupt peace if you believe you are doing God's work, of course, right?

Matthew is a difficult writer. We don't actually know who he is. Scholars believe he was writing after the year 70, when Christian groups were no longer really part of the Jewish community. There were too many new converts and too many people stepping aside from the path of traditional Judaism. His primary goal is to protect this church from itself, as it figures out who it is. What we read today is from a small section that speaks to the charge the disciples are given for forming a new church.

If the entire section, which is from about chapter 9, verse 36 to about chapter 11, were read together, we get a much more balanced view of the entire work Jesus is calling his church to do. Essentially, we read the foundational texts written to a people who were leaving the synagogue in droves and forming new communities, desperately seeking for meaning in their world, focusing their spirituality in a new and different direction than before. Does this sound familiar? Because it's happening again, right now, today. Our culture is typically leaving organized religion in droves—and I'm not talking about the ones who have to work or who are going to Home Depot to catch up on their chores. I'm thinking of the ones who have chosen to go grab brunch over church, and who sit in the coffee shops reading *the Washington Post* religion section or whose kindles contain Karen Armstrong and Dominic Crossan. Those are the people who hunger for spirituality. But church doesn't make sense.

Matthew might have intended his gospel to be a sort of foundational document for a fledgling church. I truly wish we had more of this section of the gospel to work with today so we could get a wider vision of what Jesus was trying to call us into. Is Jesus actually advocating violence, dissension, and separation, or is the author Matthew trying to demonstrate a community in which we are free to make new decisions? I think that this is what our friends in the coffee shops are seeking. No one is looking for a religion that will goad them to lemming-like violence or separate us from our fellows. We are looking for something that will assure us of the ever-loving God who breathes spirit and peace upon us (not that this Gospel is much help for us, right?).

We are looking for those moments when we can feel reassured that we are not alone in existence. We are looking for freedom.

At the end of the day, Jesus did not usher in the sort of community we would imagine we'd have found from this reading. He did not sweep in as a warrior and bring down Roman rule and establish a literal Jewish king. That's the secret. God's peace and God's kingdom is not what we think. It's not what it looks like.

On a whole church level, it's a good reading for this interim year. There have been so many changes, with more changes still to come. In every change, it disrupts the homeostasis of our lives. Whatever it is that we are becoming during this year, it's not what we imagine. In this year, you are really challenged to live into the sort of church that you want to become with a new rector in place. It's a marvelous year, actually to face these sorts of gospels, to realize that what we are given on a Sunday morning is quite frankly baffling, and to revel in the freedom of the knowledge that someone else out there is also struggling with the notion of a church that preaches peace yet reads about discord. Who out there is hungering for a community like this, where we struggle with these readings, and ultimately, rest in the security of the Eucharist each week?