



First United Church of Oak Park  
**The Prince of Peace's Provocative Proclamation**  
Matthew 10:32-39  
Alicia Reese  
June 25, 2023

The lectionary Scripture for today drops us into the middle of Chapter 10 of the Gospel of Matthew. So, for context, Jesus is speaking to the twelve apostles, trying to prepare them for ministry. He has been telling them what to be aware of, warning them what to worry about, and teaching them what they themselves should teach others.

This teaching, in the verses Don just read for us, talks about loyalty, peace and violence, family and foe, worth and life. There is so much packed into these few verses, including some bold, provocative statements by Jesus like, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword!"

From his own lips, the Prince of Peace tells us he did not come to bring peace.

I have always found this to be a disconcerting proclamation, which is exactly what I believe Jesus intended: to unsettle his listeners. And nothing commands the attention and listening ear of others more than bold statements made with provocative words.

I have not come to bring peace. At least, not yet.

Rewind 30 years or so to the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, Son of God, Prince of Peace. But the arrival of the Christ-child did not trigger an automatic reset where suddenly, miraculously, the world became peaceful. That was never the intention of God being made flesh; that was never the kind of God we were dealing with.

The coming of Christ was not a promise to fix the problems of the world with the wave of a magic wand. We forget the words of Simeon when he blessed Jesus in the temple as a baby: he said, "this child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him." (Luke 2:34)

The birth of Christ came with several divine promises: that he would cause some to rise, others to fall, and many would oppose him, he would be divisive; but above all, the birth of God in the vulnerable form of a human baby, to an unmarried woman, and a refugee family,

was a promise of hope for an age of peace that still has yet to come to fruition. For there cannot be peace without justice, and there cannot be justice without confronting the injustices of our world.

I believe this is what Jesus came to do. To challenge us to confront the injustices of the world, not to start a new religion or even a political rebellion against the Roman empire, but to do something even bigger, that would unsettle, that would rearrange us, both personally and as a society. And he came to show and teach us that we have a part to play in doing so, in bringing about that realm of peace, by confronting the powers of the world and the injustices they create and perpetuate.

And what does confrontation often lead to? Division. Especially when it is a confrontation of the powers that be, of the status quo. Because there will always be those in power who fear the loss of that power. We were warned from the beginning that the arrival of the Christ-child would not be viewed as an occasion for celebration by everyone. We were warned of the divisions his presence would cause.

I have not come to bring peace. Not yet.

His coming meant to unsettle people, to trigger heightened tension and disagreement, leading to division of those who were for, and those who were against, Jesus and the message he brought. The message of the Gospel, of Good News, of the kin-dom of God, of justice, liberation, equity, love, and peace, for all people.

The divisiveness of confronting the status quo was as true in first century Palestine as it is today, and our current context is rife with divisions—political, economic, social, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexuality included.

How many of you have experienced these divisions firsthand, particularly within your own family?

For Jesus said, “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; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”

How many of you have had a family occasion turn sour, or dreaded going to the family Christmas, Thanksgiving, or wedding because of THAT relative: maybe it’s a sibling, a grandparent, a parent, an in-law, an aunt or uncle, or cousin. Undoubtedly, you know that they will bring up one of these divisive topics that you vehemently disagree with them on and

will then have to make the difficult decision of whether or not you are going to suffer through it in silence, or summon the courage to risk whatever consequences there will be for speaking your mind and heart to confront them. Or perhaps there has been too much damage done and you have already cut ties with that relative, or they have cut ties with you.

One's foes will be members of one's own household.

Yes, Jesus speaks boldly and provocatively, but not just for shock value; his blunt honesty was the best way to prepare his followers for the challenges they would face in the ministry they were called to carry out: because he knew that the message he was teaching his disciples, and asking them to teach, would be divisive.

He knew that in order for there to be peace there had to be justice, and in order for there to be justice, one would have to be willing to risk division, even among their closest family members, to confront the injustices of the world.

In wrestling with our scripture this week and given the fact that it is Pride month and today, the Pride parade, I couldn't help but think about my own family...

Nearly four years ago, one of my younger siblings came out to me as transgender. At that point they had only confided in a couple of their college friends, but not our siblings or parents. They were concerned about how everyone else would receive, react, and respond to them if or when they shared this news.

- Would they be met with love, understanding, and celebration?
- Or confusion and questions: both uncomfortably curious and potentially inappropriate or harmful questions.
- Or worst of all, would they react with disgust, contempt, or straight up denial of their humanity, dignity, and inherent worth as a queerly beloved child of God?

The latter of these responses is far too often the reality for too many queerly beloved individuals; it is a harmfully invalidating response of which the impact can be overwhelming loss: loss of a place to live (protection and security), a support system (financially and emotionally), loss of love, acceptance, belonging—all of the things we as human beings need to survive and thrive.

Is it any wonder that the denial of such needs have made...

- \*Suicide the second leading cause of death among those between the ages of 10 and 24? And LGBTQIA+ youth are 4x more likely to attempt suicide than their peers.
- \*Nearly 2 million queer youth consider suicide every year and at least one attempts suicide every 45 seconds. Meaning that in the one hour we are in church worshipping, there are 80 queer youth who attempt suicide.
- And these numbers only increase for trans youth and for black and brown trans youth.

This suicide epidemic is heartbreaking and devastating, but is just one of the many injustices that must be confronted before there can be peace.

I thank God every day for my sibling, for the beloved child of God they are and have always been, but mostly that now they get to claim what that looks like for them. That they are able to live as who they truly are and were created to be. And that they have the love and support of those who matter most, and know that they belong. But not everyone's story turns out the way theirs did.

I believe that God calls us to love, accept, and celebrate every person because they were created in the divine image of God.

I believe that to treat someone with disgust or contempt because of who they are or what they look like, or to deny someone's humanity, dignity, or inherent worth and value is evil, harmful, and perpetuates injustice, which will forever prevent peace from prevailing.

The Gospel message Jesus brought to the world, and brings to us still today, of the kingdom of God, calls us to confront the powers of injustice in the world. It is meant to unsettle us, to flip the table of the status quo. This is the ministry of being a disciple of Christ and it should take priority and precedence over familial and societal ties. That is not an easy task or burden to bear.

\*Statistics: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/facts-about-lgbtq-youth-suicide/>

But the question we must ask ourselves is: whom do we serve?

- Is it the empire? The powers that be, the status quo?
- Is it the people around us?
- Or is it God enfleshed? The Prince of Peace, hope for the beloved kin-dom, the way of justice and liberation, of love and peace.

No, the birth of Christ did not usher in an era of peace, but rather an era of challenge and confrontation, where convictions will be tested and decisions made about the things that matter in this earthly, human life. If we are to see that realm of peace come to fruition, we have a part to play, a cross to bear:

Confront injustice so that there may be justice, and when there is justice there can be peace.

So may it be. Amen.