

Written Copy: Matthew 10:26-33 “The Hill You Need to Stand On”

4th Sunday @ Pentecost: Proper 7

Sunday, June 25th, 2023

Text: Matthew 10:26-33

²⁶ "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. ²⁸ And 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? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. ³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

The text's intent

Jesus gives an honest and open summation of what it will be like to be the Church proclaiming the Gospel. As He encountered resistance and persecution, so will we. That means we are faithfully reflecting Him, and the unbelieving world hates the Jesus they see in us. But what we confess behind the safe walls of the Sanctuary needs to be confessed out in the world as we are given opportunity. When persecution comes, we are not to seek martyrdom, yet not be afraid if it comes. We are precious to the God who sent His Son to die for us. He knows of our suffering and will not abandon us but walk with us through it, using it as part of our witness. We are not to be afraid of the lies they tell about us because they will be shown to be what they truly are on the Last Day. His hidden will, which allows suffering to come will be made known and make sense to us if not now, then on the Last Day. His truth will be made known. And the worst they can do is kill the body, at which point our soul goes to be with Jesus and we are free from all temptation and suffering. Suffering doesn't mean He has abandoned us or no longer loves us. All we need do is look to the cross to see how much the Father loved in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. By the faith the Spirit keeps alive through the means of grace we are to continue confessing to be followers of Christ in word and deed, and by doing so our faith will grow. But denying Him can kill faith and send us to eternal judgment. Yet the same Gospel forgiveness we preach is our when we deny Him, as the Spirit works repentant faith and restores us as God's precious children. Just as He did with Peter, so He will do with you and me.

Focus Statement:

Because we are united with Christ through faith in baptism, the world can hate us just as it hated Him. But that doesn't mean that Christ has abandoned us or is not with us. All we need do is look to the cross to see just how much He loves us and is for us. The witness of the Spirit in our hearts cries out to be heard. And the Gospel message needs to be heard now, especially to save those whom the Holy Spirit calls from eternal torment in the Lake of Fire.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

When we encounter opposition to our Christian faith, or even when we sense we are outnumbered, it can stifle our witness. We may even be tempted to deny it all together. We can ignore the divine appointments God sets for us out of fear of ridicule or retribution. We can even let the unbelieving world tell us to stop preaching Jesus. Continued denial can lead to loss of faith and eternal life.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Take heart, knowing that persecution and opposition means we are reflecting Christ faithfully. And while all of us at times may deny our faith, or fail to take advantage of witnessing opportunities, the grace of the Gospel and the love of Christ that saved Peter when he denied Jesus, can turn our repentant hearts back to Him.

Subject Sentence: Repentant Faith is the cure for denial of Jesus.

Introduction

There are some hills that are just not worth dying over. By that I mean there are times when it is better to keep your thoughts and opinions to yourself. An example would be when your spouse, or maybe your daughter, when you are over for dinner, asks you if her lasagna is as good as your mother used to make. And in all reality; it's not. That's not a hill you generally want to live and die on. Suitable answers? "They're both excellent." "Yours is very good. "Mother/Grandmother would be very proud of you." "It's not the same as hers, but I like yours just a well." Even little white lies that show Christian love are a better answer.

There are some hills that are just not worth dying over, such as your favorite sports team. Now pride in your team is not always a bad thing. And lighthearted banter about whose team is better is all in keeping with friendship and camaraderie. But of course, one can take it too far, such as when your team scores and the opposing team is losing, and you stand in front of a fellow spectator (or even a friend) who is wearing the opposing team's jersey, and you proceed to say "Ha! In your face! Your team is a bunch of losers!" That is probably going too far. That's a hill that you shouldn't want your friendship and fellowship with others to die on.

When I was on vicarage in the Chicago area in 2016, one of the elders of the congregation I was assigned to, who had ties to Michigan, took me to see the Chicago White Sox play the Detroit Tigers at what was then called "U.S. Cellular Field". Much to our surprise and joy the Tigers played very well. They were teeing off on White Sox pitching and hit several home runs. We were decked out with Tigers hats and apparel. And when they hit the first home run, we smiled and fist bumped, but didn't stand up and yell or anything like that. We figured that being in enemy territory standing and cheering might be unwise. But then we noticed that more than a few who were sitting around us were also cheering for the Tigers. No longer feeling like we were in enemy territory we began to cheer too, although not as loudly as if we were back home in Comerica Park. Our love and loyalty for the Tigers was not a hill we wanted to die for.

But how about when it comes to professing your love, your loyalty, your faith in Jesus Christ? How often, when you are around friends, family members, neighbors, do you conceal your faith in Christ so as to not offend them, or so that they don't make fun of you? Have you ever been in a situation where someone is talking about non-Biblical ideas like Evolution, Same Sex Marriage, Transgenderism, and you remain silent. Not that you should start an argument, but at least engage them in conversation to find out why they feel the way they do. Has there ever been a time when it seemed the Lord may have opened a door for you with someone who is discussing life problems, and you have the chance to share how faith in Jesus helps you, but you didn't take advantage of it because you were afraid of what they might say or think about you? How often is your faith in Christ a hill you aren't willing to die for? Perhaps too often, for you and for me too.

Jesus Doesn't Pull Any Punches on Difficulty of Witnessing

Here we have this most wonderful message that was the subject of last week's sermon: how all mankind are born as enemies of God deserving to live apart from Him now and for eternity. But God Himself came down to be the atoning sacrifice that redeems mankind from slavery to sin, death, and the devil. His life, death, and resurrection are the free gift that declares all who believe to be in right standing with Him. It's the message that proclaims we were reconciled to the Father as His free gift in Christ, so that instead of being enemies, we are declared to be His precious children. And not just us, but all who hear that Gospel message and believe, not matter who they are or how bad they have been. That's a message that all people should be overjoyed to hear, and believe in, except they are not.

Jesus tells us that just as the world by and large refused to hear His message, or believe in Him, but instead claimed the miracles He did were by the power of Satan, so too will the world by and large reject us and His message we try to proclaim. The world today has its own gods and its own saviors. The world is comfortable with its gods, fashioned in the image culture has created. This is the god that says it's okay when people live to please their own hearts, follow their own passions, and fulfill their own lusts. This is the "god" that certain successful preachers proclaim just wants you to be successful, happy, and content in this life now. And they offer ways for you to make it happen. It all sounds good, but that's not the God who presents Himself in Scripture. What our God wants is for us to remain in faith toward Him now and be found in the true Paradise of Eternal Life.

The world today likes the idea that the various gods that people worship are just different names for the same thing, and that all roads lead to the same eternity. Even some who claim to be Christian have, in reality, set themselves up as God. They have decided that they can make up their own beliefs about who God is and what He requires from His Creation. They believe they don't need to be a part of any Church, and don't ever need to gather together with other believers for worship. They've lost sight and understanding that it is in the Corporate Worship setting that Christ delivers His gifts of grace, despite what Scripture clearly says to the contrary. They see Church membership and attendance as "Old School". They see God as being happy when they are as good as they can be, and do good things to those they feel are worthy of their help. And where is Jesus? He is there, sitting on the shelf in a case that says, "Break glass in case of emergency". Otherwise, they say, ***"Just let me live like I want to and be happy. I'll call you if I need you."*** This is the God who loves all people and therefore is tolerant of all lifestyles. He doesn't judge people like the Church does.

People who have created a god in their own image and likeness don't want to hear the truth from Scripture and can react very vehemently when it is spoken to them. Jeremiah suffered horribly for this very reason: beaten and thrown in stocks, all because he warned Jerusalem that if they did not turn back to the LORD and obey His call to be subservient to Babylonian rule as punishment from the hand of God, they would be destroyed. Instead, they believed the lies of the priest Pashhur, who said that Babylon would be gone in a year, that all the people and treasures taken would be returned, and that the city would never be destroyed because God's temple was there. But within a year Jeremiah's prophetic warnings came true. The city and temple were destroyed, and Pashhur and his family were taken into exile where they died without ever returning.

In the same way the Jews of Jesus day didn't want to hear His message. The peoples that the Apostles were sent to after Pentecost didn't always want to hear their law and gospel message either. While some would listen, many others would rise up and persecute them. Church tradition claims that all but the Apostle John suffered and died horribly as martyrs. John himself suffered for his proclamation of Christ at the hands of the Roman Emperor Domitian who had him boiled in oil. When he survived that the Emperor exiled him to the Island of Patmos. The early church suffered likewise for their faith, sometimes having to decide between renouncing Jesus and living, or dying. They had to choose between worshipping the Emperor and other gods, or starving because they weren't allowed to work and do business. Yet most chose to suffer and die rather than give up their faith. Living as believers in Jesus was a hill they found worthy to stand on.

Christians today suffer severe persecution around the world for their faith, especially in Islamic countries. Thankfully here in America we are not made to suffer in the same way, at least not yet. But that time may be coming. According to the First Amendment we have the right to speak our Biblical faith in the public arena. Yet has can be seen in the news, and as some of you may have experienced in your life, the reality of that freedom is being put to the test. Just as in Jeremiah's day, just as in the Apostle's Day, people do not want to hear the Biblical truth about who God really is, how He commands us to live, and what He has to say about sinful lifestyles. And because they don't want to hear the truth about sin, they are not open to hearing the wonder and grace of the Gospel.

Jesus Command to the Church, then and Now

Jesus has important marching orders for His Church, both then and now. While our call to share the Gospel is not the same as the Apostles, and while He hasn't called most of us to be missionaries to foreign lands in the midst of a hostile pagan culture, much of His instruction has bearing on our lives today. Keep in mind we are no longer living in a "Christian culture". It is becoming more pagan by the moment. So, Jesus is speaking instruction to you and me too.

Matthew 10:26 “So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

What does He say? What is the repeated emphasis in our text? Don't be afraid! Stop being afraid! Stop being afraid to live as Christian in the world and to be His witness in word and action. Don't be afraid of the lies that the world may tell about us: that we are judgmental, bigoted, and unloving people who want to take away a person's freedom to live as they want to. The truth that the Holy Spirit wants to reveal in the lives of all who live to please themselves is that they are not free. They are enslaved to sin. Living to please one's own desires is actually very empty and filled with loneliness and sorrow. Living apart from God and His commands doesn't work. You can see that in all the unhappiness and violence in our world today. They need to hear the wonderful Gospel message about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who came to break their slavery to sin and give them a new life of hope and love. They need to hear that He came to give them a new life lived out in faith toward Him, a life where He shows them what sin really is, and then shows them joy of a living as a forgiven and redeemed child of God, no longer enslaved by sin, but freed to serve Jesus out of love and obedience for all He has done and given as His free gift. The message we have to share can set them free to live as God designed life to be lived.

Matthew 10:28 And 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.

We are to stop being afraid of those who threaten us unless we stop proclaiming and living out our faith in Christ. While my hope and prayer is that none of us are called to be martyrs for the faith, we should never be afraid if it was to come to that. Why? Because the One who is really in control of all things is Jesus Christ, our ascended Lord and Savior. He rules over all things and all peoples from the right hand of God. He knows all that has happened or will happen to you. More than that, anything that happens, including any persecution you might suffer for your faith has been allowed by Him to serve His own purposes. And what is His purpose for you, His end goal for you? That you are found standing with Him, glorified in body and soul to live forever with Him and the Church in the restored Paradise of Eternal Life. We may not understand the immediate purpose our suffering serves, but as He said verse 26 **for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known** on the Last Day.

And Jesus knows what its like to suffer on behalf of the truth of the Gospel. He doesn't take your suffering lightly, even if it's just emotional suffering at the hands of those who make fun of you behind your back, or maybe even to your face. He knows what it's like to face a "Cancel Culture" that claims to be for free speech, as long as it's their own views being expressed, and anyone with an opposing view needs to be canceled. Don't be afraid to be canceled. As Jesus says the truth will be made known on the Last Day, if not before.

Matthew 10:32-33 ³² **So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,** ³³ **but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.**

The worst anyone can do is end your life in this world. And if that happens, you've won. Now I don't have a death wish. I like my life and ministry in this world. But we should not become so attached to these lives that we are willing to deny our faith in Jesus Christ. Doing so can have some drastic consequences. Once you start denying your faith in Christ where does it stop? Our confessions of faith, which are the Creeds, are not meant to just be recited behind the safe confines of this Sanctuary, but in our words and actions beyond these Church walls. Continued denial of our faith in Christ can be the means by which you head down that slippery slope that ends in unbelief and an eternity in hell.

But when we acknowledge our faith in Christ, by what we say and do, and even when we are made to suffer in some way for it, the Holy Spirit uses that to make our faith stronger and draw us closer to Jesus. It's the Holy Spirit's presence in your heart and mind that moves you to live out your life in faith toward Him. And that faith that trusts in Him alone assures us that our Lord and Savior is acknowledging us before the Father as His precious children now and will continue to do so all the way to eternity to come. And through our witness the Holy Spirit can and does work miraculously in the most hardened hearts to bring people to faith, so that they too acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior

Conclusion

What about those times in your life when your faith in Jesus Christ and how He commands us to live has been a hill you didn't want to die on? What about those times when you kept quiet about your faith in Him and your life of worship? What if you have once upon a time denied you believe in Him? You are not alone in this. All Christians experience times of weakness when persecution and temptation come knocking. Take a lesson from the Apostle Peter who, when asked point blank if He was a follower of Jesus, denied even knowing Him, let alone following Him. Who did Jesus make a special post resurrection appearance to? Peter. Who did Jesus personally restore to faith asking three times "**Peter, do you love me?**" How is it that Peter, who denied his Lord, can be restored? His repentant faith was the key. The same is true for you. That very Gospel Message you are to proclaim says to you that Jesus died to forgive every one of your sins, even the sin of denying Him. Turn back in faith and know that He loves you and forgives you.

Jesus knows that being His witness is hard. He knows that many will ignore the Gospel's call to faith and will even stand publicly and vocally opposed to it. But He doesn't expect you to work the miracle of conversion. All He asks the Church is to stand firmly by faith on the hill that is our confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior, and to share as we have opportunity, He who has redeemed and reconciled all mankind and delivers that gift by faith. He wants us to show by our lives that living in obedience with Him now makes life better than living apart from Him. And the end is far better: eternal Paradise to come. May the Spirit strengthen you to stand in faith until Jesus calls you home. Amen.