

***Jesus' Love = Justice Love***  
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Matthew 10.37-42

My great-aunt Gladys and great-uncle Arthur loved going to the State Fair every year. And every year, my great-aunt would tell Uncle Arthur, "Let's take the helicopter ride."

But Uncle Arthur was a little, frugal, and whereas rollercoaster and Ferris wheel and carousel rides were only a few tickets each, a helicopter ride cost an arms length of tickets worth about \$30. So Uncle Arthur would always say, "The helicopter ride is \$30, and \$30 is \$30."

One year, Aunt Gladys and Uncle Arthur were at the fair, and Aunt Gladys put her foot down. She said, "Arthur, we're in our 80's and if we don't ride this ride this year we may not be up to it next year. This could be our last chance." To which Uncle Arthur replied, "\$30 is \$30!"

The pilot heard this discussion and took pity on my great-aunt. He wanted to help out but he didn't want to hear a lot of bickering. So, he told them, "Folks, I'll make you a deal. I'll take you on a ride for free IF you can stay quiet for the entire ride. If I hear a peep out either one of you, it's \$30. But if you stay quiet, the ride's on me."

Well, Uncle Arthur didn't object to a free ride, so off they went. The pilot really did his best to show my great-aunt and great-uncle a good time. He wanted what was probably going to be their only helicopter ride to be a thrilling one, so he made figure-eights in the air, turned sideways, did all kinds of crazy things so that this one ride would be something they would remember and cherish forever.

When they landed, the pilot said, "Good for you! The ride is free because I never heard a peep out of you." To which Aunt Gladys replied, "Well, to be honest, I almost said something when Arthur fell out, but \$30 is \$30."

That was kind of a harsh story, but our gospel reading is another harsh text. So, we may as well take a look at it.

In the tenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus talking about mission. The chapter opens with Jesus summoning his disciples and telling them to reach out to the world and to announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand. And what that seems to mean is that his followers are to go about ministering to the sick, touching the untouchables, loving the unlovable, and offering hope to people who need it most. Creating a community of justice-love is the mission of the followers of Jesus.

Now, that phrase "kingdom of God" is so common to us, it doesn't strike us as it would have people in the first century. In Caesar's Empire, one does not announce a new kingdom. Imagine declaring Fort Lauderdale a new republic! I bet things would get interesting, and by interesting I mean ugly, pretty fast. Talk of a new kingdom made some wonder if Jesus was trying to foment a revolution. Why do you suppose he was killed?

I doubt if Jesus ever had any desire to take up arms against Rome ; but the truth is, a message of inclusion that says every person without exception has dignity and sacred value is, even still, quite revolutionary. And it still makes the keepers of power nervous and sometimes even violent.

By verse 16, Matthew's Jesus is very frank. He says, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves..." He tells them to be careful because charges will be brought against them. Preaching a new kingdom was considered treasonous and there may be severe consequences.

The mission Jesus gives to his disciples is a dangerous one, but he says, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet

not one of them falls to the ground without God knowing about it...So, do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.”

The mission of Jesus, according to Matthew, is costly, but somehow worth the risk.

And that brings us to verses 37-42 which is the end of the chapter. And today's reading is consistent with the rest of the chapter. Followers of Jesus may lose privilege, position, comfort, even security. But if we all commit to being bold followers of Jesus, we will be forming a community wherein we never have to face the difficulties alone. Someone is always here to encourage us, or to share a cup of water when it is needed.

That's a difficult message in some ways, especially in our culture where Christianity isn't the underground movement it was for Matthew's community. In our culture, being Christian places you in the majority. But in Matthew's day, being a follower of Jesus involved risk and yet, the Community of Christ felt called to take those risks in order to establish a divine Realm where peace and justice could finally be known. Faith wasn't holding a safe opinion; faith was the power to act...to make a difference.

We must remember that Matthew's gospel is being written half a century after Rome executes Jesus and about 15 years after Rome destroys the Temple of Jerusalem . After these terrifying events, the person we're calling Matthew is saying to his community, “DON'T GIVE UP. As horrible as things seem, do not give up! Doing the work of justice is what identifies us as followers of Jesus. The threat of death didn't stop him and we can't let it stop us.”

The Religious Right may be roaring its rhetoric of rage and its pugnacious piety. Some states may try to write discrimination into their constitutions. The housing market may be in shambles and gas prices may be crippling, BUT DON'T GIVE UP. Keep doing the work of establishing a better kin-dom of justice-love, right in the midst of all this anxiety.

Matthew won't let us forget that Jesus stands in the prophetic tradition of challenging oppression and calling for progressive change. Yes, Love was his motivation, but his love wasn't an empty sentimentality; it was justice-love. Love of neighbor that was so radical it included the Other...people in the margins of his society...women, children, the ancient enemies of his people – the Canaanites, the poor, Samaritans, lepers...people religion and government and society said were inferior or disposable or even evil.

Jesus' power was the power of love...Justice-love...Love in Action. Advocating even for people religious leaders condemned. Surely that speaks to us in some way???

Even though Christianity has a more privileged status in our culture than it does in some others and than it did in Matthew's, we are still followers of the one who risked everything to make the world more just. To follow him is to follow his example, and even for us, that won't always be easy.

We don't have creeds and doctrinal litmus tests around here, but we do share some progressive, positive, practical principles which I believe are exactly the principles Jesus lived by. One of the ways we sum up those principles is in the Eight Points of Progressive Christianity.

The 7<sup>th</sup> of those 8 points reminds that we hope to “Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the **work** we feel called to do: striving for *peace and justice* among all people...and bringing *hope* to those [who need it most].” Isn't that what Matthew is pulling no punches in saying?

To be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus; and to follow Jesus is to be motivated by Justice-love to bring about the divine Community, the Kin-dom of God, where justice and hope are offered to all. The result of such important work will be our reward.

Alone, we couldn't do it; but together, we can encourage one another and offer those refreshing cups of water when they are needed, so that our witness of inclusion and empowerment continues to be heard. As we answer this call, we *are* changing our world; we are getting closer to ushering in the Commonwealth of God where the sacred value of every person is affirmed and where no one is left out.

This is the Good News. Amen.

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I am part of a divine community.  
In community I am filled with hope.  
In community I share hope with others.  
As a follower of Jesus, I make a difference.  
I am a person of power...  
And I empower others.  
And so it is.

Jane Addams was the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She once said, "The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life."