

Year A Proper 12 “Do Not Be Afraid. Drink Up” Matthew 10 vv24-39

Fear. I begin with words of Max Lucado, written in his book called *Fearless*:

You may not be down to your final heartbeat, but you may be down to your last paycheck, solution, or thimble of faith. Each sunrise seems to bring fresh reasons for fear...We fear being sued, finishing last, going broke; we fear the mole on the back, the new kid on the block, the sound of the clock as it ticks us closer to the grave. We sophisticate investment plans, create elaborate security systems, and legislate stronger military, yet we depend on mood-altering drugs more than any other generation in history. Moreover, “ordinary children today are more fearful than psychiatric patients were in the 1950’s.” Fear, it seems, has taken a hundred-year lease on the building next door and set up shop. Oversize and rude, fear is unwilling to share the heart with happiness. Happiness complies and leaves. Do you ever see the two together? Can one be happy and afraid at the same time? Clear thinking and afraid? Confident and afraid? Merciful and afraid? No. Fear is the big bully in the school hallway: brash, loud, and unproductive. For all the noise fear makes and room it takes, fear does little good. Fear never wrote a symphony or poem, negotiated a peace treaty, or cured a disease. Fear never pulled a family out of poverty or a country out of bigotry. Fear never saved a marriage or a business. Courage did that. Faith did that. People who refused to consult or cower to the timidities did that. But fear itself? Fear herds us into a prison and slams the doors. Wouldn’t it be great to walk out? (p.4-5)

We need to know that Matthew was writing during a time when the young Church had already become a persecuted Church. Christians, though few in number, were seen as a threat to the great Roman Empire. Christians were filled with fear. Matthew was drawing on the sayings of Jesus that he knew addressed this situation. He wanted to encourage and uphold the Christians being mistreated, in some cases, killed. But fear is something, as Max Lucado points out, not unique to early

Christians. Many people are consumed by fear – it rules their hearts and minds. We tend to call it “worry” rather than fear and it often keeps us awake at night or puts us on edge during the day if we’re not busy enough to keep worrisome thoughts at bay.

First, let’s understand why the Christians Matthew addresses were the subject of anger and distrust and, to do this, we need to go back to Jesus on the cross.

Why was Jesus murdered on a cross? Because people – certain people – were fearful. Jesus was a threat. Jesus was a threat to the power and way of life of the religious leaders. Jesus was a threat to the power of the Roman Empire. That was why they hung him on the cross... and because Jesus resisted their idea of power – power as status, property, and wealth; power that says violence is sometimes necessary to keep the status quo – because Jesus resisted that corrupted worldly version of power, he freed us from that power. Jesus gave us the way to back into right relationship with God and with neighbour.

Jesus’ whole life was dedicated to living the way of God’s kingdom, a way of life without fear, a way that was clearly not in line with the way of the world. In God’s kingdom there is no unequal status...no unequal wealth...no unequal property...no violence...no power except for the power of God and that power is love. The perfect love of God is greater than any human love...love for mother, love for father, love for anyone. Jesus is letting us know that the perfect love of God is the ultimate goal, the standard, the love that will guide us in our love for all else. For this reason, love of God comes first in our lives. When we recognize God’s love as above all others and love God above all others then that amazing love allows us to love abundantly, to love generously and freely, without fear.

Jesus was living this way – he was living the way of God’s kingdom and it was attracting followers. That meant it was also attracting the attention of the world’s powers...the leaders who were leaders *because* of the way the world worked and who wanted it to stay that way.

Jesus was quietly, but most definitely, causing a stir...a nonviolent stir. The sword Jesus brought is, if you are familiar with the rest of the New Testament, the sword Jesus brought was the word of God – the good news that the kingdom is here, he was living in it and he was inviting others to do the same.

The whispers were spreading... “We don’t need to live as outcasts,” the poor were saying. “We don’t need to be forbidden from worship of God,” the sick were saying. “We don’t need to be victims of the rich,” the oppressed were saying. The whispers were growing more persistent, more urgent. Jesus knew the time would soon come for the whispers to stop being whispers. Jesus knew what was now being said in secret would soon be proclaimed from the housetops. And Jesus knew that was going to cost many of his followers their lives – or, at least, their lives as they currently were. The gospel is, without doubt, very good news, “but it also radically calls into question a world built without recognition of God and upon values foreign or even contrary to God’s law. Confrontation is unavoidable. A gospel that bothers no one and [a gospel that] questions nothing is [not the gospel]” (p. 103 of *Days of the Lord Vol.4 Ordinary Time Year A*). Then and now, the gospel confronts the comfortable not wanting to “rock the boat”, the gospel challenges the fear of change, the gospel calls out the hypocrites who claim to be good and merciful but serve their self-interests. Convictions are tested. Things that matter are questioned. The gospel causes division. The young Church was experiencing more than just angry words or cold shoulders from relatives and friends who didn’t share their

passion for the gospel. They were experiencing violence because of this division. But Jesus reassures them and us.

Jesus reassures his followers that in God's eyes they are precious. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" he asks. "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted," he says. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Some listening to him then, or hearing his words through Matthew's writing, would still deny him. Some would fall down on their knees and worship the idols of the empire instead of dying for God's kingdom like Jesus had. Many deny him today. Many worship the gods of empire today. Jesus' cross was resistance – resistance to the broken power structures of this world. Jesus' cross was the nonviolent resistance of love...the perfect love of God that says I'm not playing your game, I'm not playing by your rules because your rules lead to brokenness. Many of Jesus' followers took up his cross, resisting the brokenness of this world as Jesus had, living like him in the way of God's kingdom, knowing that the perfection found in God's kingdom was worth dying for.

Our cross, too, is resistance. Our cross is the nonviolent love of God that says to the broken world, "We're not playing your game." While others around us are falling to their knees to worship the idols of the empire we choose to lose our lives that value status, wealth, and property above all else. We choose to lose that brokenness to live the wholeness of life in God's kingdom.

Preacher Fred Craddock describes his experience with learning what it is to lose your life. As a youth, he went off to bible camp, experiencing inspiring days and nights of consecration near the lake lit by candlelight. They'd sing songs like, "Are You Able?"

and he'd go back to his cabin and lie on his bunk and say, "Yes God, I'm able." "Are you able to give your life?" "Yes God – I'm able to give my life." Fred writes, "I pictured myself running in front of a train and rescuing a child, swimming out and saving someone from drowning. I pictured myself against a gray wall and some soldier saying, 'One last chance to deny Christ and live,' and I confessed my faith and they said, 'Ready, aim, fire.' The body slumps, the flag is at half-mast, widows are weeping in the afternoon. And later a monument is built, and people come with their cameras. 'Johnny, you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let's get your picture.'

I was sincere then," Fred says, "as I have been these forty-five years. I give my life, but nobody warned me that I could not write one big cheque. I've had to write forty-five years of little cheques. A dollar here, 87 cents there nibbled away this losing of life. Are you able to drink the cup? I can drink the cup in one giant swallow and let my life be given. But, no...My life is one of drinking a sip here, a sip there, a sip here again...and soon you reach retirement and did anybody notice that you gave your life and drank the cup?"

I say, "yes" – they notice. The people you give your life for one sip at a time. They notice. Not many of us will march in a protest or drive the nails into the roof of a much needed school for orphans in Madagascar. But people will notice the food we bring to St. Vincent Place. People will notice the school supplies distributed through our local food banks. People notice, at every fundraiser, our bright pink sign that says, "Thank you for helping us help others." People notice.

But constantly writing little cheques can make it difficult to see the impact of the good news and it most definitely makes it easier for fear to creep in and take over.

“Christians very often seem to fight a losing battle. Being a little flock, they are submerged by the surrounding world, which sees them as despised and mocked dreamers, as dangerous challengers to be marginalized or suppressed” (p.104, *Days of the Lord*) or, perhaps worse, as annoying “bible thumpers.” We experience the fear of being irrelevant, considered unimportant; the fear of being ridiculed, the fear of dwindling away into nothingness. Jesus takes our fears seriously. More than any other statement in all the gospels, Jesus tells us: Don’t be afraid.

So don’t be afraid. You’re worth much more than many sparrows. (Matt.10.31)

Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven. (Matt.9:2)

I tell you not to worry about everyday life – whether you have enough (matt.6.25)

Don’t be afraid. Just believe, and your daughter will be well. (Luke 8.50)

Take courage. I am here! (Matt.14.27)

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. (Matt.10.28)

Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32).

Don’t let your hearts be troubled (John 14.1)...See to it you are not alarmed (Matt.24.6)...Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.

We will continue to write our little cheques and take our sips from the cup, wielding the sword, resisting the world’s power and healing its brokenness. We raise whispers into shouts to welcome all into God’s kingdom. Together, one sip turns into many, hastening the perfecting of God’s kingdom. Jesus said the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light – the kingdom of heaven is at hand...Drink up.