

Sermon 06.21.20
Proper 7 - Year A Matthew 10:24-39

When I was in elementary school and junior high, we had to complete the Presidential Physical Fitness Test every year. I don't know if this is still done now or if it has changed any, but during the period when I was taking this test, each year we were timed and tracked on sit ups, push ups, shuttle run, long jump, pull ups or the flex arm hang, and a 1-mile run. My results were usually pretty middle of the road in these different tasks - never the best but not the worst either, except maybe on the flex arm hang where we were timed on how long we could hold ourselves at the top of a pull up. Those were awful, and I'm not sure I was ever able to hold a pull up for more than a second or two.

When I was in 8th grade, our last test activity was the timed 1-mile run. I have never been much of a runner, and next to the flex arm hang, this was my most dreaded test, but that year I was able to get the mile finished in reasonable time. As those of us who had finished with the run waited on everyone else to get done, it was obvious that there was one girl in our class who was really struggling to make it through the run and was going to finish far later than everyone else. She was a very quiet, awkward girl who was much taller and larger than any of the other kids in our class and was clearly uncomfortable in her own skin. It was almost painful to

watch her struggle to finish the run, and as she approached the end, one of our classmates, a very popular boy who was the best athlete in our school, made a loud, funny but unkind joke about this girl, and we all laughed. There is no way the girl did not hear the joke, which had to have made a bad situation much worse for her. I remember that for the remainder of the P.E. class that day she stood off by herself as the rest of us gathered together to compare our results - not one of us speaking to her or even getting close to her.

It wasn't until I got home later that day and thought back to the situation that I started to understand the choice I and my classmates made that day and the impact of what we did, and what we did not do. At first, I tried to console myself with the fact that I wasn't the one who had actually made the hurtful joke. The boy who did was the one who caused the pain. It didn't take long to figure out, however, that the laughter that I took part in only made the situation worse. If the girl had any hope that someone would come to her defense, she immediately found out that she was alone in her embarrassment and hurt. Not one of us spoke up on her behalf or made the slightest effort to reach out to her. She was different and vulnerable, and it was much easier to laugh along with everyone else than to call out the boy who made the joke or even to be seen as sympathetic to the girl and her situation. When she needed some support

and concern from those of us around her, what she received instead was hurtful laughter followed by silence. Not one of us cared enough about her to risk having the spotlight put on us. We made sure we were safe from being ridiculed or mocked ourselves. We all chose to protect our own safety and comfort rather than to speak up or act in support of another person who was hurting.

This is a situation I have remembered again and again for almost 40 years when faced with decisions to make about when and if to speak up or to act when my own comfort or well-being may be in jeopardy. I think it's tempting to identify cruelty, indifference, and pain caused by a group of 8th graders and think that with experience and adulthood better, kinder, less selfish actions come more easily, but that really isn't always the case for me, as I expect it continues to challenge many of you. But living in braver, bolder, more loving ways is exactly what is demanded of us as we take up the cross to follow Jesus.

These demands are starkly evident in Jesus' words we hear today. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Now I don't believe Jesus wants to destroy families and relationships, but it seems clear that when we prioritize these connections, the ones that

often provide personal comfort and security, over proclaiming the Good News of Jesus we are not exhibiting what it means to follow Jesus. And if peace is only found if we keep silent or hidden or secret the truth we have learned through Jesus in an effort to avoid confrontation and conflict or to preserve our sense of safety, this is not God's peace. This is not the peace that surpasses all understanding. It is not the full, abundant life found in the peace of shalom. When we are satisfied with acting only to preserve the peace of our own lives and of those in our close circle, we are settling for a cheap kind of peace, the kind that Jesus did not come into the world to bring.

But as we all know very well, making the choice to respond to people, situations, and circumstances in loving, caring, daring, unselfish ways, when doing so is uncomfortable, demanding, and unwelcome is hard to do. How easy is it to write off a bad situation as someone else's fault, another person's problem, or something we just don't feel like worrying about right now? Don't we all have enough issues of our own to deal with without taking on the challenges of others? It doesn't really matter what I do anyway. Can't people fix things themselves?

These types of reasons, and many more, are arguments we can use to give ourselves excuses for not getting involved when people around us, but maybe not directly connected to us, are struggling. The problem with

these excuses is that they take us away from how Jesus tells us we should live. Jesus does not say “love your neighbor, unless you are really busy or they have problems that don’t impact you or you don’t feel like their needs are your concern.” Jesus says “love your neighbor as yourself.” Our neighbors’ needs, worries, and concerns are ours too.

In these days of physical distancing, we might not be literally face-to-face with many other people right now, but it is next to impossible to be unaware of the many struggles that are occurring all around. The impact of the spread of the Coronavirus and the efforts to fight its transmission can be seen throughout our community and in the wider world. This pandemic has also uncovered many ways too many individuals are vulnerable as their housing, medical care, and basic safety and security have been jeopardized by furloughs, job losses, and the closing of many support services. Problems of racism, violence, and discrimination, while by no means new, have become very visible in recent weeks as tragic deaths have brought urgent attention to the very real hurt and systemic prejudice Black people experience far too often in their daily lives and have had to fight against for far too long.

As serious and varied as all of these problems are, this list is not complete nor is resolution of these issues easy or straightforward or without controversy. There is certainly the temptation to become

frustrated, discouraged, or overwhelmed by the enormity of these problems and the energy and effort it will take to face them as well as the potential arguments and disputes that will occur when people with different concerns and priorities try to find solutions.

Getting involved when we see other people hurting or struggling is very seldom easy and can turn our lives upside down in ways we cannot imagine. Whether it's spending time caring for someone who is sick or lonely, volunteering to assist people in our community with physical needs and offering caring connections, joining a protest march, listening to understand our neighbors - particularly our Black neighbors and our materially poor neighbors - when they share their experiences of barriers and hurdles and systems that keep them from being able to thrive, or simply reaching out in kindness to another person who is hurting - these actions all require intention on our part and can lead us to places we don't necessarily want to go. "Those who find their life," says Jesus, "will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

When we are tempted to keep out of the way or to stay silent in the face of these fears, it is important to remember that Jesus not only expects us to be involved in the needs and concerns of our neighbors but also promises that God's presence will be with us at every step. If even the sparrows are cared for by the Father, we are not to be afraid because we

are of more value than many sparrows. And that preciousness extends to all of God's children.

This week as I thought about my own fears, the challenges and brokenness that can often seem too great, and my desire to follow Jesus faithfully through it all, there were two things that came to mind that speak to ways that we can take up the cross and follow Jesus. Before she pronounces God's blessing, Mother Becca says words that always catch my attention, but this week they seemed especially important. I hope she won't mind me using them here. "My friends, life is short, and we do not have long to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us, so be swift to love, make haste to be kind, and make no peace with oppression."

The other words come from the motto of the Order of the Daughters of the King. The women of the order, including those who are members here at Christ Church, focus on prayer, service, and evangelism, and they faithfully pray for others and provide support in many ways for the spread of Christ's kingdom. Their motto is, "For His Sake, I am but one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. What I can do, I ought to do. What I ought to do, by the grace of God I will do. Lord, what will you have me do?"

In these days and the days to come, may we all be ready to ask, "Lord, what will you have me do?" And may we be ready for the answers.