

June 25, 2023
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 12, Year A
Matthew 10:24-39
Romans 5:1-8
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Warnings

I wonder how many of you remember a time when it was socially advantageous for you to be a part of a church, a time when it seemed like almost everyone was a part of some faith community, a time when it was strange not to be. Someone shared with me recently, that in the community where she grew up, and in the time when she grew up, some members of Roman Catholic churches would leave the Roman Catholic church to join Protestant churches. They didn't make the change for theological reasons. They made the change because the best country clubs in her area wouldn't accept Roman Catholics. They made the switch to Protestant churches because, joining the most prestigious country clubs had social and economic advantages. Membership could help them advance in their careers.

It's been a long time, I think, since being a part of a church carried with it those kinds of advantages. As I said in my sermon last week, fewer and fewer people in our society are connected to a faith community of any kind, and I think, that in the society that we're living in today, it would be considered to be deeply offensive to ask someone's religious affiliation when they were joining some kind of secular organization.

My own kids report to me that many, if not most of their classmates at school are not religious and do not attend any kind of church or other religious organization. In fact, there have been times when, for some of my

kids, it felt strange that our family was so “into church” when it’s just not something that their peers do. They have wondered, at times, why church is so important to us, when it’s not important to the people around them.

Abigail is going to the same college that I went to, I was there in the in the mid-1990s, from 1993 to 1997. When I was there Susquehanna University had a very active chapel council program, with several ministry activities under the chapel council umbrella. It had a group for Roman Catholics, a group for Jewish students, and then, many groups in general for Christians or other religious students including a drama group, called Chancel Drama, that staged a full length musical with Christian themes, like Godspell once a year, Acts 29, a performance ministry group, Prayer Partners, which is what the Prayer Partners group that we just started here at Emmanuel is modeled after, an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship group, which hosted several Bible Studies, a student led gospel choir, called Voices of Praise, and an active chapel worshipping community. It will probably come as no surprise to you that I was involved in all of those things to some degree during my time at Susquehanna. Now, 26 years later most of those groups are gone. The chapel worship services are small, with only a few students attending. Abigail attends and helps with the chapel services, but it doesn’t connect her with the same kind of social circle that my participation in the chapel activities did in my time.

A lot has changed in the past 25 years, for sure and more in the past 50. Certainly, a lot has changed in the past 125 years, for as long as Emmanuel has been around, and since church was the center of people’s spiritual and social lives, especially for immigrants new to this country. As I said in last week’s sermon there is a lot to lament about the changes that have taken

place in the church and in the world that have led to the decline of religion and churches in our culture and in our world.

Of course, some of those changes can be laid at the feet of the church itself, as scandals, unchecked abuses, and unloving and uncompassionate teachings and behaviors, that have shown themselves to be the exact opposite of the servant, foot washing love that Jesus showed, have led people to turn away from the church and to label all Christians as hypocrites, regardless of how unfair that label, applied to every Christian or every Christian church might be. So, yes, there is a lot to lament about what we as a body have done to ourselves, in making our life together about social climbing or institutional survival or abuses of power. And there is a lot to lament and about how the world has turned away from the, even imperfectly communicated, challenging message of death and resurrection, of radical love and sacrifice, of confession and honesty and forgiveness, and of the barrier breaking inclusiveness and welcome found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But even as I lament, I have to wonder, are we closer now to the earliest church, the church from which and to which the gospels were originally written, the church as it was in the first century, in the years immediately following Jesus' resurrection when Christianity had no political clout, when there was no social advantage to being a Christian, when being a Christian was a strange and radical move to make, a strange way to choose to live? Are we closer now, to being like the earliest church than we have been in almost 1700 years? And if we are, then how do we hear today's gospel reading, in which Jesus warns his earliest followers, that, rather than giving them social advantage, being a Christian would probably cause them troubles in their lives.

Listen to Jesus' warnings in the gospel reading for today. "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!" (Matthew 10:25b) In other words, Jesus was warning the people who followed him that just as he was rejected by many people in his time, they could expect to be rejected by the society around them. They could expect to be called names and to be suspected of bringing, not goodness, but evil.

Jesus told his disciples, "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." (Matthew 10:28)

In other words, Jesus was warning his followers, that they might face physical persecution for their faithfulness to him. And he is also warning them to remain faithful, for his way, no matter what it might seem, is the way of life. Here are his words of comfort for those who might have been afraid of the persecutions they saw coming:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31)

Scholars believe that the gospel of Matthew was written sometime between AD 80-90, which means that at the time that it was written following Jesus was causing problems for people. Christianity was recognized as an accepted religion by Rome and, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, Jews who believed in Jesus were being expelled from the

Jewish faith. So, whether you were a Jewish Christian or a Gentile Christian, belief in Jesus could get you into the kind of trouble that Jesus describes in today's gospel reading when he says:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For 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.

(Matthew 10:34-36).

I would say that Jesus didn't actually want to sow conflict in families, but rather that he knew that it was inevitable. It has always been true that belief in Jesus can create conflict in families, and it was certainly true in the earliest church, that for many, many new believers, their faith in Jesus led to them being rejected by their biological families.

In today's gospel reading Jesus warns that there is nothing easy or even safe about being a Christian. He talks about following him in terms of taking up one's cross, and losing one's life. Following Jesus is not about country clubs or social climbing or even social acceptance. Some of the advantages of being a part of a church that might have once existed are not on Jesus' list of what it means to be one of Jesus' followers.

So why do it? Why did Jesus' first followers follow him then? Why, when they heard his warnings, did they stay? Why did the earliest Christians, who were being rejected by their families, who were fired from their jobs,

and who were being accused of being unpatriotic, superstitious cannibals, who could be executed for their imagined crimes against the empire, why did they still follow, still believe?

And, well, today, why do we? I wonder why you do it. Why you believe? Why you stay? Why, even if your family thinks it's strange and doesn't sit in the pew beside you. Why, even if your friends or classmates or teammates might think you're bizarre, some kind of religious freak if you can't show up for something because you're going to church. Why, even when the sins of the church of the past and even of the present are held up in front of you and you know you can't deny them, can't deny that the church on earth, which is supposed to be a reflection of the beautiful body of Christ is broken, corrupt, and has done much harm in the world through the centuries.

I don't know your answer to those questions, but I know some of mine. I stay because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus my Lord. And I would not, and I firmly believe I could not know him without the church. And I could not have a community to walk through life with, even with all of its brokenness and all of its mistakes, without the church. And I would not know that I had died to sin and been raised to new life in Jesus Christ in my baptism without the church.

And these words, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5), which I have spoken over so many graves, the bodies of our beloved ones, give me hope, no matter what I'm going through in my life and what is happening in the world. I believe that in a world of death, I follow, I am saved by, I am, and we are being transformed by the Lord of life.

Today we have a congregational meeting, a part of our institutional life, but behind it all, agendas and Roberts Rules of Order, and elections and financial reports and policies and procedures, is a community trying to live like Jesus taught us, trying be the body of Christ in the world and trying to live out our identity statement which we hear in the words: “We are Emmanuel Lutheran Church, worshiping God with joy, loving one another, serving all. We welcome you.”

We are not called to be the church of 25 years ago or 50 years ago or even the church 125 years ago. We are called to be the church of today, which, ironically enough, might look more like the church of the 90s than the church of the 1990s. But they made it, those long-ago Christians. They lived the story and shared it, even though they might have thought that very few people were listening or believing with them. We stand on their witness and we are called to our own, to proclaim to a world that might seem like it’s not listening, the hope, the life, the love, that we have found in Jesus Christ, who has counted every hair on our heads, who knows when every sparrow falls, who died for us and who lives with us and in us, and who has given us eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.