

“The Discomfort of the Word”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

June 21, 2020 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – June 21, 2020

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus #570 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1 & 4

I have decided to follow Jesus

I have decided to follow Jesus

I have decided to follow Jesus

No turning back no turning back

Will you decide now to follow Jesus

Will you decide now to follow Jesus

Will you decide now to follow Jesus

No turning back no turning back

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In the Bulb There is a Flower #474 in the Book of Praise All verses

In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree

In cocoons a hidden promise, butterflies will soon be free

In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody

There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me

From the past will come the future, what it holds a mystery

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see

In our end is our beginning, in our time infinity

In our doubt there is believing, in our life eternity

In our death a resurrection, at the last a victory

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see

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Follow Me, the Master Said #645 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1, 2 4

Follow me, the Master said: we will follow Jesus
By his word and Spirit led, we will follow Jesus
Still for us his lives to plead, at the throne will intercede
Offers help in time of need; we will follow Jesus

Should the world and sin oppose, we will follow Jesus
He is greater than our foes; we will follow Jesus
On his promise we depend; he will hear us and defend,
Help and keep us to the end; we will follow Jesus

Ever keep that end in view; we will follow Jesus
All his promises are true; we will follow Jesus
When this earthly course is run, and the Master says, “Well done!”
Life eternal we have won; we will follow Jesus

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Scripture Texts: Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 10:32-39

32 “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. 33 But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

34 “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn

*“a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,*

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

36 a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household. ’

37 “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How often do you turn to the Scriptures for help, guidance and comfort? We’re always being reminded to do this. We can find whatever we need within the Word of God. We find assurance and reassurance, direction, instruction, encouragement, reminders. You name it, it’s in there. One of my University professors said it’s the best book for everyone to read because it meets every genre – poetry, history, intrigue, good vs. evil, drama, comedy, mystery, and so on. For followers of Jesus, it is the ultimate textbook for life. The Word of God is a living Word. It spans all times and places and generations. It is always relevant. It always has what we need.

Even the stuff we don’t like.

The Bible doesn’t only have reassurance and direction within its pages. It also tells stories of war, violence, disobedience, consequences, heartbreak, and tragedy. There are times when we read the Scriptures and wonder why what we are reading is in there. Well, sometimes an experience of discomfort precedes comfort. Crucifixion precedes resurrection. As the Rev. Peter Bush says in the title of his book our Session studied a few years ago, *In Dying We are Born.*¹

The Word of God is a Word of comfort. It can also be a Word of discomfort. Like the passage we have shared from Matthew’s Gospel today. Jesus says, *I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law...,”* Pardon me? I adore and respect my mother-in-law, with

¹ Bush, Peter. In Dying We are Born. Alban, Herdon VA, 2008.

whom I share faith in Jesus. Doesn't he respect that relationship? Doesn't he rejoice in how we are connected in him? And then, *Anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me...* Excuse me? I love my sons enough to make sure they know Jesus! Doesn't he see that I give thanks to God for giving me my family to love? It's a hard passage to read. It certainly isn't one of the more comfortable parts of Scripture. It's rather challenging. Because if we read Scripture without taking time to pray for understanding and to study its message, we aren't really hearing what the actual message may be. Between the cultural and historical context of the time when the Bible was being written down, how the meanings of words have changed over the centuries, and the huge variety of translations available to us, sometimes it takes some work to really know what God is saying to us. The message doesn't change, but how we hear and understand it can be a little tricky.

I receive a daily Bible reading email from the Canadian Bible Society every morning. I read it while I'm having my breakfast. It's a good way to get my day on the move in a good frame of mind. Most days.

However, over the winter there were a couple of steady weeks of daily readings from the Old Testament. They all contained instructions from God to the people to conquer other nations. They were to show no mercy. The details in those readings are sometimes a little hard to swallow – not to mention the breakfast I was eating as I read them. As each day progressed with another set of instructions, I started to feel rather annoyed. It was unnerving. I'm not sure it put me in a great frame of mind for the day. I could see how over the generations people have used Bible passages to justify behaviour and actions that are moments in human history we are not proud of. Sadly, that still happens. You can make the Bible say anything you want it to, if you take it out of context and if you make it about what you want instead of what God is actually saying. I can tell you, there were times in my post-secondary studies and still throughout my career when studying a particular story or passage has been difficult. Sometimes it is hard to reconcile a loving, merciful God with the printed words on the page. Sometimes it's hard to follow what God says through his Word, because it's not the way we want it to be. Or, we simply don't understand.

I'm not going to pretend I have all the answers when it comes to understanding the Scriptures. Sometimes I read them with a big question mark over my head. It's a good thing the Lord understands me and my limitations so well, because if complete understanding was a requirement for salvation, I'd be in big trouble. Some of it is truly a mystery to me. Now, I love a good mystery. Miss Marple and I would get along well. But there is no way I can solve the mysteries of the Bible – Moses' encounter with the bush that burned without being consumed;

Elijah being taken up to heaven;
Daniel surviving the lions' den;
Mary's pregnancy;
Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus;
Jesus' miracles;
Jesus' resurrection.

But these mysteries are not meant to be solved. They don't need to be solved. They are stories that proclaim God's glory and power. They are events that illustrate the omnipotence of God. Mystery is an intrinsic part of our faith, so that we don't forget who it is we worship, how powerful God is, and what has been done for us through Christ.

But these mysteries are not what cause us discomfort when we read the Word. What makes us most uncomfortable are the instructions for living lives fully committed to and centred on Jesus:

Love your enemies.

Pray for those who persecute you.

Love Jesus more than you love your children or your parents.

Pray 'thy will be done,' and mean it.

Pray unceasingly.

Hold unswervingly to hope in Christ.

These can be pretty difficult to follow. And as hard as we try, we sometimes fall short of the mark. Sometimes we miss it altogether. But we need not worry when we fail. We need to remember that we are not perfect. We are not expected to be perfect. That's why it is such good news that we are forgiven.

As disciples of Jesus we believe in the Holy Spirit... the forgiveness of sins... the resurrection of the body... and the life everlasting. The closing words of the Apostles' Creed remind us why even when the Word is uncomfortable to read, we read it with trust that God will speak through it and give us a sense of his will for us. God's Word is perfect. It's just that sometimes it's hard for us to read and understand. Sometimes we place our trust in someone whose Word we can't always explain.

So that we aren't left hanging with regard to the warning Jesus gives in this passage from Matthew's Gospel, I did some reading about the community to which these words would have been spoken, and later written. One writer said, "It seems likely that this controversial saying by Jesus was included in the Matthean community because a conversion to Christianity meant that you faced severe persecution, and often at the hands of family members. Religious persecution and even extreme punishments are a sad fact even in our modern world... In some countries, if you confess faith in Jesus Christ, you

will be disinherited, thrown out, shunned by your family, your community.”² Sometimes it is worse. Sometimes relationships do break down because of a conversion or commitment to faith in Jesus. Sometimes our commitment to following his way is in stark contrast to how our loved ones would live, and it causes conflict. Standing up for our faith, and being devoted to Christ can be a dividing point between people, whether that be parents and children, siblings, friends or neighbours. So when Jesus told the people to love him more than their sons and daughters, as hard as it is, he meant that we are not to give up our faith in him, not even for those closest to us. That’s a difficult instruction to hear. I know I have experienced relationships that have become strained or even ended because of my chosen career path and the faith that led me here. Do I regret it? No. Was it hard? Yes. I can only hope that one day the people with whom I used to have those relationships will understand what it means to follow Jesus.

Most of us have encountered Scripture passages along the way that we find difficult. We likely do not all find the same difficulty in the same passages. Regardless of the specifics, all of us have made a commitment to God – to read and follow the Word as faithfully as we can, and to seek God’s help when it gets tough. The Word of God is a word of comfort. It can also be a word of discomfort. But the heart of it is what covers it all...

the heart of the Gospel is at the heart of everyone who prays for understanding when we read and study the Word;

the heart of the Gospel is the truth that frames everything else;

the heart of the Gospel is Jesus. He died and took the power of death with him for those who would believe in him. He rose, and left the power of death behind for those who would believe in him. He sent his Spirit to be his presence among his people, and to nurture our faith in him. Sometimes it is difficult to follow the Word, but we have his guidance to help us follow as closely as we can. We have his forgiveness when we fall short. We have his peace when we face conflict because of his Word. We have his understanding when his Word is uncomfortable for us to hear. He knows how hard it can be to be his disciples – thus the warning in the Gospel today. But he knows how much harder it would be for us without the Scriptures, and gives us his Spirit to help us cope.

A word of comfort is found even when the Word is uncomfortable. Give thanks to God for that comfort, for it all comes down to something we can always hold onto: in the greatest of difficulty, God is greater. Our faith in him, through Christ, is our greatest comfort. Amen.

² From desperatepreacher.com/sermonbuilder. “Taking up the Sword of Justice” written by Rev. Frank Schaefer. Based on Matthew 10:24-39.