

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7, Matthew 10:24-39
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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

So, how's it going? How many times have I asked my family and friends this question in the last few months! And, how many times have I been asked it! Before the pandemic, you have undoubtedly asked or been asked the same question in countless casual greetings, but now it has taken on a new meaning. How am I, how are you, how are *we* managing our lives during the pandemic and, even more recently, during a possible social revolution, no less? Together have upended our lives as individuals and as a society. The Germans have a very similar question that can also be used for casual greetings. It translates literally, "How goes it with you?" And the typical response is, "It goes." That's how I've been feeling during this pandemic. Life goes on and I try to make the best of it. I stick to my routines as I'm able—reading, prayer, exercise, some chores around the house or on our boat. But I also try to attend to the needs of those around me, try not to eat too much, try to limit my access to the bad news that doesn't ever go away. In other words, it goes.

Given all this, I could almost wish I were preaching on a different Gospel lesson. Don't get me wrong. I like the saying, "Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." But Jesus didn't stop there, did he? He went on, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Right now, after months of pandemic, after weeks of marching in the streets, and after the centuries unjust racial discrimination that motivated that marching, we could do with some peace. Enough of swords! And yet, Jesus is unrelenting: "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...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..." In a similar passage, just a bit earlier in Matthew, Jesus surprised one of his disciples who had asked permission to bury his father by saying, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury the dead." One commentator wrote about this response, "This is, quite frankly, outrageous." This same commentator says similar things about today's Gospel, pointing out that Jesus is "advocating behaviour that his contemporaries, both Jewish and non-Jewish, would have regarded as scandalous" (NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 401).

Sometimes, it seems, when we ask a prophet for bread, we get a stone. And by the way, these sayings about betrayals between family members are not original to Jesus; he's quoting the prophet Micah. So, he's not the only prophet who says things that were hard to hear. In any case, before we dismiss these hard sayings of Jesus too quickly, before we project back onto Jesus and his sayings our own times and experiences, let's see if we can get back into his world a bit and learn how he might have meant them at the time. There are at least two things we need to understand: first, we need to examine the cultural assumptions that are operating in the background of these sayings; and, second, we need to investigate how Jesus' view of the world influenced how he responded to those assumptions.

On the first, the background cultural assumptions, Jesus recognizes that the family in first-century Judaism is extremely important, so important that we in our highly mobile, individualized western culture have a hard time understanding it. The family is still central to Judaism today, but then it was the bedrock of Jewish

life and survival, and—more to the point—it was put in place by God. So, Jesus seems not only to be running roughshod over a long-held cultural tradition, but he also seems to be ignoring the command of God to honor one’s father and mother. That being said however, second, how did Jesus’ views influence his response to these cultural assumptions? The best explanation seems to be that Jesus was a Jewish prophet who not only preached the coming of God’s kingdom to earth, but actually thought that its coming was happening—not in the future, but right then—*and* that it was happening in and through his ministry and his person. Given this, we should not miss the urgency that comes through his words even after 2000 years. It’s not that Jesus believed the Jewish family was a bad thing, but that the kingdom’s dawning made the family’s centrality “redundant” (Wright, 400). The kingdom-movement led by Jesus created an alternative family, one that transcended the bonds of marriage and blood, and soon one that would even transcend the Jewish nation itself to include gentiles. Literally, the whole of humanity was embraced in his vision of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that was not only coming, but was in fact already there if only he could only help his contemporaries see it.

All of this suggests that his enigmatic statement about bringing a sword to a situation where his contemporaries are desperately looking for peace is one more way of warning them that something new and history-changing was happening in their midst. We have heard this from the pulpit so many times that it is easy for us to overlook its significance. Nevertheless, based on these urgent warnings from Jesus, let me jump to our current situation and try to imagine how he might have responded to it—outspoken and outrageous prophet that he was.

In view of the arrival of the kingdom of God, Jesus' critique of the cultural assumptions around the Jewish family at a time of overwhelming national upheaval and stress—in other words, the “sword” he wielded when they wanted peace most of all—was a critique of what had become *normal* in Jewish family life, just as elsewhere he critiques what was normal about their religious and political lives. In his view, the peace they wanted was the *wrong kind of peace*—it was a peace of a triumphant kingdom that put Jerusalem at the center of world power. Jesus is warning his fellow Jews that, in their perfectly understandable desire for peace, they had made an idol out of what they perceived as normal, indeed, out of what they perceived as God-given, their cultural assumptions about family being the current object of his concern. But, he says, it is these very cultural assumptions that will lead them astray, lead them eventually to rebel against their Roman oppressors in the fight they cannot win, and lead them in the meantime, if they're not careful, to miss God's current action in their midst.

You can see where I'm going with this. As much as I kick against these hard sayings of Jesus, I appreciate them. They force us to examine not only the cultural assumptions of his time and place, but our own as well. Many of us want nothing more right now than for things to go back to “normal.” We are weary with waiting for the pandemic to abate, of hunkering down in our homes, and we desire our work, our church, and our family lives to get back to what they were. But Jesus forces us to stop and think about this. If the marching of the past few weeks has taught us anything, it should have taught us that our normal is someone else's oppression. It's not deliberate on our part, but still it happens. Our history of systemic racial discrimination and economic domination has stepped on masses of people for so long we hardly even see it any more. We enjoy opportunities and

privileges that millions in our own country do not enjoy, to say nothing about billions of people around the world. I don't say these things to make us feel guilty—it's usually not about our individual intentions. I say them to help us to begin see the taken-for-granted cultural assumptions in operation in our perfectly understandable desires for normality. Indeed, it may be the case that, on reflection, our normality wasn't all that great and trying make it great again will only make things worse, much worse.

In light of the still-coming kingdom of God, in light of our prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, let us allow Jesus to bring his sword to our own cultural assumptions, to our own interpretations of normal reality, and try, with God's grace, to find a way forward in which we open our arms to the poor, the racially different, the stranger among us, and let us welcome them into our lives and invite them into God's kingdom. Indeed, we may find that they are already in that kingdom, waiting to greet us. Amen.