

“Courageous Relationship”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church, Colorado Springs
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Matthew 10:21-42 (The Message)

“When people realize it is the living God you are presenting and not some idol that makes them feel good, they are going to turn on you, even people in your own family. There is a great irony here: proclaiming so much love, experiencing so much hate! But don’t quit. Don’t cave in. It is all well worth it in the end. It is not success you are after in such times but survival. Be survivors! ...Don’t be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There’s nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life—body and soul—in his hands.

“What’s the price of a pet canary? Some loose change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail—even numbering the hairs on your head! So don’t be intimidated by all this bully talk. You’re worth more than a million canaries. ...

“Don’t think I’ve come to make life cozy. I’ve come to cut—make a sharp knife-cut between son and father, daughter and mother, bride and mother-in-law—cut through these cozy domestic arrangements and free you for God. Well-meaning family members can be your worst enemies. ...If your first concern is to look after yourself, you’ll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you’ll find both yourself and me. We are intimately linked in this harvest work. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God’s messenger. Accepting someone’s help is as good as giving someone help. This is a large work I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it. It’s best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won’t lose out on a thing.”

We are in the season of Pentecost. The Disciples have been sent out into the world; they face the unknown, but the known might actually be worse – they *know* their mission is difficult and they will be persecuted because of it. But, they’ve had experience with this before.

Our scripture story today is *not* after the Biblical event of Pentecost, but the situation is similar. Our story falls in the middle of what is called the Missionary Discourse in the gospel of Matthew, when Matthew portrays Jesus instructing his

disciples for a time of going out into towns and cities, telling them not to bring anything with them, and giving them fair warning about what they will face.

Their mission is to go and make disciples. To present the living God, not some idol who makes people feel good. Then, they'll either have to leave quickly, wiping the dust from their feet behind them, or stay to invest in and *make disciples*.

Matthew and Jesus have the same goal. Just as Jesus was encouraging his disciples, his band of followers during his ministry, Matthew is also trying to encourage his audience, people about a generation behind that of the life of Christ. For both Jesus and Matthew, the work is great, and there is immense opportunity, but workers are scarce. The crop is there and ready to be harvested, but there are not enough laborers. Matthew seems to think it is because they do not understand the work of discipleship or the need in the world. Instead of convincing them by telling them the rewards of how they will benefit, he tells them exactly what is expected. He does not tell them that it is an easy task. Instead he tells them that it is not *supposed* to be an easy task.

He seeks to inspire them to the work. The work is daunting, but that is exactly what makes it worth doing. It is the daunting work that builds relationship.

Have you ever noticed that it is the things that go wrong, or the things that take a lot of effort, that make for the best stories, and the strongest relationships? Some of you remember our Advent Festival last year...definitely a story of things not going quite as planned, but workers persevering and building relationship because of it. We planned a great festival, and it would have a break in the middle of it for the kids and families to attend the performance of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* that children from the Colorado Springs Conservatory were performing in our sanctuary. After the performance, we'd

have dinner, then go to the Festival of Lights Parade. Simple, right? Well, I decided to invite all of the people in the sanctuary for the performance over to dinner... ☺ The folks getting dinner ready in the kitchen were warned that there would be a few extra mouths to feed. And there was quite a scramble. We had no idea how many people would actually stay. But, everything came together, and it was wonderful. There was plenty of food thanks to the workers, and the pride and awe they felt at being able to welcome new guests to the able is still evident when they speak of it today. They built relationships not only amongst themselves, but also feel a closer bond with those they served. This is just one small example of daunting work that truly builds relationships.

This section of Matthew is about relationship. It is about *really difficult* relationship. Relationship with the people to whom they are telling about the living God; relationship with those who are “bullying” them, relationship with those they are leaving behind – their family; relationship with themselves, and even relationship with God. Did you hear about any *easy* relationships in this passage? Nope. Every single one of them is difficult, every single one of them has some kind of obstacle to work through, persevered through, in order to achieve the ultimate goal – discipleship, and making disciples.

For Matthew, the concern isn't the number of people who *hear* about Christ, about the living God. The rest of Matthew's gospel account doesn't include the crowds proclaiming amazement at Jesus that Mark's gospel does, for example. The crowds are not always impeding Jesus' movements because they can't get enough of him. Instead, Matthew's gospel includes stories like the Parable of the Sower, where the seeds are scattered, but only some of them take hold. In other words, the word of God falls on

many ears, but only some of them understand. Only some of them become disciples. Jesus understands. Shortly before the passage we read, at the end of chapter 9, it says that “Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest.’” When Jesus sees the crowds, he has compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless. Another translation uses the words *harassed* and helpless.

If *you* look at the world around you today, what do *you* see? How would you characterize the “crowds”? Are they safe and secure, untroubled, strong? Or are they troubled, harassed, uncertain, fearful? If they are the latter, do you, like Jesus, have compassion on them?

Jesus understands the nature of those to whom he is preaching, the nature of those out of whom he is trying to make disciples. There will be many ears to hear the words, but it takes more than simply hearing in order for them to become disciples, in order for them to become *workers* who might be able to lead the harassed and troubled crowds into safety and security in God’s love. To do it, they must understand the nature of what discipleship truly means, the *really difficult* relationships that are involved, and they must believe in the value of persevering through them in order to show God’s love to all.

And so here, when Jesus instructs his small band of disciples as he sends them out into the world, he tells them of the difficulty of their work. And Matthew, writing down the story a generation after the life of Jesus, writes for a community that claims a relationship – a kind of kinship – with these apostles, who gave up everything to follow Jesus. This little community of early Christians listens to the story for how God is sending *them* in their own turn, a generation or so later, and they're undoubtedly wrestling with how much they may have to give up, too, and what the risks are that they will run. Maybe they've already paid a price for being disciples of this Jesus, especially if their family ties are strained or broken by their new faith commitment. Family ties were even more important in that time and culture than they are today, if we can imagine such a thing. When family identity protected you from the many dangers of life, broken relationships could be a matter of life and death.¹

It's hard for me to imagine what it might mean for the original audience of these words to be told that they might need to cut their family ties, when most of us today are working hard to *strengthen* our family structures. Today I think we relate more to the prophet Micah, who first uses the words that Jesus repeats here (Micah 7:6) – “Son disrespects father, a daughter rises up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; people's enemies are members of their own households.” In Micah, these words are used as a lament, expressing sadness about the division of households. In Matthew, Jesus uses the words as prophetic, as something that will be necessary for his followers. We, who value family so much, are more like Micah, lamenting over the separations that our world causes. What is it like for someone today

¹ Kate Huey, UCC Sermon Seeds

who *yearns* for closer family to hear that family should be discarded as something less important to the mission of Christ?

What is it like for one of the teens living at Urban Peak, who has been thrown out of her family home because of her sexual identity? What is it like for the teens in TwoCor, the program that our building is now hosting for their weekly gathering, teens who have often grown up moving from one foster family to another, never finding a settled home, *needing* so much to know that *someone* cares about him as a mother cares for a child? What does it mean for a family in Interfaith Hospitality Network who may not have a stable home, but at least they have each other to help them get through a really tough time in their lives?

Jesus *is* saying something daunting to all of us, in the many contexts in which we come to this passage. For some, telling them to forget family members who have hurt them might actually sound like a relief. However. Jesus is *not* calling his disciples to *avoid* relationship – he is *not* saying to cut ties from relationship altogether. Instead, Jesus is calling his disciples to *courageous* relationship. Relationship that is scary, that is daunting. Relationship that requires us to persevere, relationship that requires us to know what it costs us and do it anyway, relationship that requires us to put something higher than ourselves.

It is *because of* that something-higher-than-ourselves that we can have any meaningful relationship at all. Without the love of God, every other relationship is limited. A mother's love of daughter or son would only be able to go so far. But if love in God is the higher commitment, higher goal, that love can spread and multiply millions of times over. Love in a family relationship can be so much stronger because of it. Love is

never divided – sharing it only strengthens it. *That* is what Jesus is asking his disciples to do. To put love of God first, so that by losing your life you might save it.

The demands are scary. They are daunting. They are costly. They require us to reach beyond ourselves, and engage in really difficult relationships with others, with ourselves, and with our God. And they will be worth it. These relationships will be more satisfying, more obviously important, than any of the things that don't require anything out of us.

I can guarantee that the workers at TwoCor, or Urban Peak – people trying to build relationships with teens who aren't used to having caring, loving relationships – won't have an easy time of their work. It has been and is going to be hard to get past frustrations, disappointment, trauma, and keep working with those teens in love. It is not easy for a city to care for a population of people who find themselves homeless. It has not been easy for a church in a culture of religious-decline to work hard to be radically hospitable, open to new ideas, always searching for creative ways to welcome all people. And it is certainly not easy to have conversations with family members, maybe Christian, maybe not, from whose beliefs you are diverging, moving away from, but all of these relationships are worth persevering through.

The Message translation that we have before us ends this passage with Jesus' words saying "This is a large work I've called you into." Large work, indeed. Challenging status quo relationships, challenging injustice *does cause* conflict. It causes *really difficult* relationship. And it is precisely there that Christ calls for courageous relationship. For pushing against things that are causing or allowing the suffering of others, sometimes pushing against one's very family, one's very self.

The scripture continues – “This is a large work I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it. It’s best to start small. Give a cup of cool water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won’t lose out on a thing.” When you see the harassed and troubled crowds, what will your courageous relationship of challenging the status quo be? Maybe it’s starting small by forming a friendship with someone who you’re not supposed to, or *leaving* a friendship that has been damaging. Maybe it’s showing compassion to someone who needs to know that someone cares about them – like a church visitor who doesn’t truly know if she’s welcome when she comes into the church door and doesn’t see anyone right away. Or teaching a child, investing in his life, showing him that there are many adults who believe that time with him is worthwhile, as I learned when I was in Sunday school and youth group.

What is the “large work” you are doing for the sake of the gospel today? What is the daunting task before you that is entirely worth the courageous relationship that it will take to get through it?

Amen.