P4A 2026 Matthew 10:24-39

For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Happy Father's Day! Since Father's Day is not a liturgical holiday, it is only by coincidence that this gospel is appointed in the lectionary today, but even if this were not a day for celebrating family, these words of Jesus still seem strange—as if Jesus forgot the good tidings of great joy that the angels shared at his birth—*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.* Now that he is all grown up, Jesus tells us he has *not* come to bring peace but a sword. In this world that is full to overflowing with conflict, strife, even violence, what are we to do with this Jesus who promises to further divide to our already broken human community? We certainly have siblings in the body of Christ who are happy stop right here and say, *See, Jesus told us that we are supposed to be at war with one another.* And they find no shortage of enemies to fight, both within Christianity and certainly against anyone outside the faith. But does Jesus really desire more hostility? After all, enemies in one's own household and daughters-in-law against mothers-in-law…we don't need Jesus for that; we can do that on our own. What more is going on here?

We've been reading for a couple weeks now Jesus' instructions to the disciples as he sends them out to proclaim the coming of the kingdom. This is a continuation of that pep talk, a clarification of expectations: their mission is going to be difficult, and they won't always be well-received. They should be prepared for opposition, even persecution. By the time Matthew writes these words, his community was already experiencing the difficulties Jesus hints at in this passage. Jewish Christians were expelled from their synagogues for following Jesus as the Messiah; gentile Christians found themselves at odds with the mainstream culture when they gave up the many gods of the Roman Empire to become monotheistic Christians. The movement Jesus started split communities between those who chose to follow him and those who believed they were being faithful by *not* following him. Sometimes that divide happened right down the middle of families.

But Jesus did not create division for division's sake. That was not the intent of his mission but a byproduct of it. I realize that I'm crossing over into John's gospel here, but in Jesus' own words, he came that we may have life and have it abundantly. However, abundant life for all requires unjust and inequitable systems to change, and change—even just a little change—usually causes conflict. Our Bible study leader at Assembly yesterday talked about how the life of faith regularly requires us to do the Hokey Pokey…you turn yourself around, repenting from ungodly ways of life in order to pursue life as God intends us to live it. But, if things are working well for us, we don't want to change. If we're at peace with the way things are, we don't want to hear the call to repentance, even if it is the sword Jesus brings to cuts us off from the ways of life that are not good for us or good for the community.

There are two ways we can read scripture: as *de*scribing the way things are or *pre*scribing the way things should be. When Jesus is anointed, and Judas grumbles that the costly perfume could have been sold to feed the poor, Jesus says *You will always have the poor among you.* That doesn't mean that we *should* keep people in poverty. Here, Jesus isn't telling us to divide ourselves into factions and start fights. He's not prescribing discord. He's describing the inevitable outcome of following his countercultural way of life: sometimes faithful discipleship of Jesus—whose radically inclusive life and teaching got him killed—causes conflict, interfaith conflict, intrafaith conflict, even conflict within families. Think about American soldiers who fought a whole Civil War because the gospel compelled them to recognize the image of God in *all* people. We're told that brother fought brother in that conflict—not fighting for fighting's sake, but because the call to faithful discipleship required turning to a different way of life. We have to expect that when we turn to follow Jesus down his countercultural path we'll meet some resistance from people who aren't willing or aren't ready to go that way. If we follow Jesus we should expect to face opposition sometimes, just like he did, because a disciple is not above the teacher.

But, are we running into conflict in our families or wider communities because we're such devoted disciples of Jesus or for other reasons. How do we tell that we're being maligned because we're faithful members of Jesus' household and not because we're acting like jerks? Sometimes we try to be righteous and come dangerously close to being self-righteous. Sometimes we have to look behind us, because the line between those things is way back there. But we have some guidance in this as well: *Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* Are our conflicts resulting from serving ourselves or serving Jesus who kept telling us to expand our love of others, loving even enemies? If we're in trouble because we're being good advocates for others, especially for the least, lost, and lowliest, or as Jesus described them in chapter nine, the harassed and helpless, then we're probably on the right road to following Jesus' way. If we're only trying to preserve and protect our own privilege, that's not persecution for being such good Christians.

In spite of the strife Jesus describes as the predictable consequence of striving to live in the kingdom of heaven while also living in this broken world, Jesus tells us *do not be afraid.* It may feel like the powers that be will overcome us as we follow the humble, merciful, generous, loving way of Jesus. But God sees the big picture and our little part of it—even knowing how many hairs are on our heads. The world may write us off for following the way of Jesus, but to God, *You are of more value than many sparrows.* Even if that's the nicest thing anyone has said to you all day, remember it's Jesus who said it. Christian discipleship can be tough and the cost can be steep—as steep as the hill on which we find the cross. But Jesus not only showed us the way, he promised to walk it with us. Thanks be to God.