

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Back in 1999 to 2006, a television series aired that was entitled *The West Wing*. This series featured an idealized enactment of democracy being played out by a cast of actors portraying an American President and his cabinet. In the final season of the show, the chief of staff has a major heart attack and has to resign his position. He recommends to the president that the press secretary take his place. Due to the pressures and the demands of the office of chief of staff, the President then asks the press secretary to consider becoming his new chief of staff. The president asks her by calling her aside and asks her if she would be willing to jump off a cliff for him. Without saying anything more about this, we all might just tell the president what he can do with his request. However, it is a metaphor for the demands of the position. But it plays out for us as well as Christians and followers of Jesus Christ.

Søren Kierkegaard a Danish Lutheran theologian, philosopher, poet, social critic, and religious author is widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher writes in 1843 in his most famous book, *Fear and Trembling* about a leap of faith. This concept of a leap of faith is not of a cliff, rather it is a genuine belief in God that cannot be proven by reason, but instead requires a willful, passionate commitment into the unknown. It is an existential choice to embrace the absurd rather than demanding logical guarantees...it is a leap of faith.<sup>1</sup>

If you are here and you believe in the mercy of Jesus Christ, we have already jumped off the cliff or we have already taken that leap of faith, but do we really understand what that means? This is where our Gospel lesson from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew comes in today.

Today is, of course, Father's Day so I hope that the fathers of the congregation are able to enjoy the day...and no, nobody is asking fathers to jump off a cliff, literally or metaphorically but I know at times it feels like this is what is demanded of a father. Nonetheless, I hope that we are all able to honor our fathers and celebrate fatherhood with a joyous and relaxed day because at first glance it seems as though the Gospel lesson is certainly not thinking about this at all. From the Gospel lesson today, we hear:

<sup>35</sup> 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; <sup>36</sup> and one's foes will be members of one's own household. <sup>37</sup> 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; <sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matt 10:35-38)

For those who feel that they do pretty well following the Ten Commandments, what do we make of this statement within our Gospel lesson today from Jesus? Is he setting us against the commandments? Moreover, is he setting us against our fathers and our mothers? Within the Ten Commandments, as soon as we are done learning the first three commandments directed at God, we hear this,

You are to honor your father and your mother.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Essential Kierkegaard*, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 2000. Fear and Trembling, pages 93-99.

This means then that we are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.<sup>2</sup> What we don't hear in this is explanation of the commandment and the Gospel lesson as well is that we distinguish and we respect our father and mother above all other persons but we do so only next to God. In other words, God's word and will are placed first and nothing ought to be considered more important. The will and word of parents are subordinate to God and are not set in opposition to God's word and will.<sup>3</sup>

What Luther is saying in his explanation of the Fourth Commandment is that we are to love God first and it is out of our love for God that we are able then to love and respect our parents. This is the sort of difficulty and confusion that occurs when we take things at face value and simply read the Bible without any further understanding other than the words that are on the page. There is always more to the words, there is context that needs to be considered before we run away screaming or start beating people over the heads with our legalistic misunderstanding of Holy Scripture.

What Jesus is saying to us in this passage today is that the cost of discipleship is demanding and extensive. It can be metaphorically like jumping off a cliff. It is a leap of faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has a very firm grasp on the cost of discipleship and has said this in his writings on the cost of discipleship:

It is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ. Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying; such has been the case from the very beginning. The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death.<sup>4</sup>

When this was originally translated into English from German, the translator translated this to say the line that became very known when talking about Bonhoeffer and discipleship that, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die."<sup>5</sup> What this means is what is before us today in this Gospel lesson.

Within the tenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we hear the lengthy conditions of discipleship before the disciples or the apostles go out wielding the authority over unclean spirits and every disease and every sickness. Jesus has gathered a wide range of personalities and backgrounds in the disciples and reminds them and us as well, of how he wants to unite his varied followers so that they might faithfully serve the one mission that is the church that is an assembly of believers made up of many different people with many different personalities and backgrounds. And this would involve taking a leap of faith or jumping off a cliff of the self, or as St. Paul would say or as Bonhoeffer would say, putting to death the old person and taking up the call of Christ which

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<sup>2</sup> Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. The Small Catechism, the Ten Commandments, The Fourth [Commandment], page 352, par 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. The Large Catechism, pages 400-403, par 107, 116.

<sup>4</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship*. Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis: Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. Chapter Four, Discipleship and the Cross, page 87.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Page 87, Footnote [11.] In the earlier English version of the *Cost of Discipleship*, Fuller translated this famous aphorism.

calls us all to see others as God sees us all through Jesus Christ...jumping off a cliff or taking a leap of faith is putting to death our self-pride that leads to and evokes our prejudices and our fears of difference.

Jesus is calling these disciples and us to pick up and continue his work, his mission to rebuke the cruelty and apathy that infected that society back then and continues to infect our society today. This call that makes us a church is our mission. The church does not *have a* mission; it is a mission...a mission that is Jesus Christ. The mission is not to enlarge the church's membership, our mission is mercy and connection, spreading positive relationships that are committed to nourishing life and loving our neighbors.

We that are gathered here today are called to carry the mercy and the grace of Jesus Christ into the world and into the future. When we look at the situations out there that litter our culture with hatred and fear, let's not forget...we too are part of it, we all make up this culture. But as demanding and difficult as this call is, we are called into situations where Jesus himself inserts his followers, that's each of us, into opportunities where mercy and grace can be made manifest. And that doesn't just happen in here as we worship, it happens out there as we go about our lives in a culture that is in need of mercy and respect for others.

As the church is the body of Christ, we then, are the blessing that Jesus Christ provides, NOT just in here during worship, but out there as we go through our lives that are entangled in the indifference that the world and its leaders too often inflict on us and on those who suffer. Do we then inflict more indifference, divisiveness, and hatred or do we meet that indifference, divisiveness, and hatred with mercy? As we heard Jesus instruct us last week, this mission will not be easy:

<sup>16</sup> "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. <sup>17</sup> Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; <sup>18</sup> and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me,...(Matt 10:16-18)

Jesus is telling us straight-up that this call will neither be easy or glamorous. Yes, we too are being asked to jump off a cliff by becoming conduits of his grace and his mercy that will be tested and refuted in this world. But we are sent as *guests*, and not as people looking for a platform to arrogantly and righteously impose our Christian agenda, our legalistic judgement, or our own will on others. Putting to death the old self is opening one's self up to the richness of other people.

This mission that is the church is not about what "we" do for "them" it's seeing how we can together enrich the grace and mercy that has been given to us all in Jesus Christ. We do not always have the resources that others can tap into for their benefit, but perhaps they have gifts that we can honor and tap into that may be beneficial for the mission of mercy that is the church.<sup>6</sup>

The One, who conforms us, shapes us, saves us, shepherds us, and unites us all as the one body is Jesus Christ...who is the same one who defines this mission that is the church that exists in the

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<sup>6</sup> The call of Jesus and the mission of the church that is being lifted up is largely based on Matthew L. Skinner's book, *Matthew, The Gospel of Promised Blessing*, Abington Press: Nashville, 2024, Chapter 3, A Vision for the Church and World, pages 42-45. Matthew L. Skinner is an Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul Minnesota.

world, not as a shelter from the world, but as the mercy for the world. Through our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, we become the seed of the promise of mercy and life.

Yes...we are the ones who die to our sin of prideful self-righteousness, but if we have died with Christ, we have been given the faith to believe that we will also live with him in the mercy we become for the world. This Mission Discourse from Jesus in this chapter of Matthew's Gospel that is before us today reminds us that we do not just sit safely in the fruit of our faith...we are called to jump off our high cliff of self-righteousness, take a leap of faith as the laborers who plant the seed of faith by becoming that very seed that dies, rather the seed that lives so that others can live as well. Through the faith poured into our hearts in the waters of our Baptism we know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him and through our faith we hold fast to the holy and certain hope that death no longer has dominion of us as well. May we know through our faith and hope that we are dead to sin, but through that leap of faith, we are all alive to God in Christ Jesus.

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