

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
July 2, 2017  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 2:6-17  
Psalm 89:1-18  
Romans 6:1-11  
Matthew 10:34-42

In the many years that I have preached from the lectionary, I don't ever remember a time when I have said, "Oh great, I get to preach Matthew 10:34-42 this week!"

I have always struggled with this text. I've often had trouble reconciling Jesus' words here that he has come not to bring peace but a sword with the words of Isaiah, who speaks of the Messiah in terms of "wonderful counselor, mighty God, *Prince of Peace*. Setting sons against fathers and daughters against mothers doesn't exactly coincide (in my mind) with One who is the *Prince of Peace*.

Nonetheless, the text is here before us, and we must deal with it.

Let's begin, but as we do, I need to tell you a story that I think will be relevant to how we approach this Gospel text.

Several years ago there was a group of us here at Epworth who met once a week to draw and to paint. We would bring whatever we were working on, and give each other feedback.

One week Gail Lane brought a painting she was working on and said to us: “I’ve worked on this painting, but something about it still doesn’t seem right. What do all of you think?”

We all looked intently at the painting for a few seconds, and then Donna Beukelman broke the silence. She said: “I’m not sure there is anything wrong with your painting. I think it needs to be in a different frame.”

The following week Gail brought her painting back to us, framed differently. We all looked at it and were amazed. The frame made all the difference.

So, hold that thought, and let’s move to our Gospel lesson for today.

First, we must understand that Jesus’ words here are not spoken in the abstract. They are not spoken in a vacuum. They are spoken to persons who have chosen (or been chosen) to carry forward Jesus’ ministry and who are meeting stiff opposition and resistance.

Jesus speaks these words in the context of a society where families were tightly knit, and where your social and economic identity was closely tied to your family. Any disruption in that family structure caused problems.

For example, when Jesus calls James and John to drop their nets and leave their father Zebedee’s fishing business to follow him, we read those words and say, “Oh my, isn’t that nice, Jesus is calling them to become fishers of men.” What we

miss in that episode is the tremendous upheaval their actions caused when they actually took Jesus up on his offer.

And as Matthew writes these words, some who were following Jesus had been shunned and even kicked out of their families because their belief in Jesus put their family under suspicion by the Roman Empire.

This is precisely what is happening for many of the apostles and others who have decided to follow Jesus. Their decision has sent shock waves reverberating through their family relationships. In some cases, those relationships have been greatly strained or even severed altogether.

This is the kind of situation into which Jesus speaks these words, and it is critical for us to understand this if we are to see this text properly. To put it another way: We must try where possible to see how Jesus' words functioned with his original hearers, and look for ways they might have a similar function for us.

When I remembered this basic principle of interpretation, I had an "aha" moment this week.

For most of my life, I have read this text as though Jesus was upbraiding me or chiding me in some manner. Almost as if Jesus was demanding an upheaval in my family relationships.

But that's not how Jesus' words function with his original hearers. Jesus is not *demanding* something; he is telling his hearers *not to be surprised* at something

that is *already happening*. Jesus' words here do not *frighten* these disciples; they *comfort* them. Jesus has known all along what might happen to them, and he speaks these words to *reassure* them.

This text is a word of *consolation*, not a word of *judgment*. Jesus is not commanding us to sever ties with our families, or to feel guilty if our families are not dysfunctional. Jesus is reminding us that our first loyalty is to *him*, and that there may be times when our loyalty to him will conflict with loyalty to our families.

You may be sitting here this morning, and you may know from firsthand experience the painful reality that your decision to follow Jesus can cost you the love of your family, or someone in it. But in such times, we are reminded that we have been adopted into a new family, a family based not on blood kinship but on doing the will of God. And what we lose for his sake we shall find again, returned to us more alive than ever before.

It is perhaps a small thing to see Jesus' words here as words of consolation about what *has* happened and *is* happening as opposed to a pronouncement about what *must* happen. And yet, how we "frame" something -- whether it be a painting or a biblical text -- can make all the difference.

This doesn't make Jesus' call on our lives any less challenging or demanding. It does not lessen the power of Jesus' call to take up the cross and follow him. But it does place that call in its proper perspective.

As we come to the Table this morning, we come with the full awareness that the call of Jesus Christ on our lives is total and all-encompassing, even as the Father's call upon him was total and all-encompassing. Responding to that call may trouble and perplex people, including the people we love most.

But with the call comes a promise. It is a promise that as we lose our lives for his sake, we shall truly find them again, and that our place in God's family is the most important place of all.

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