

Following Jesus Can Lead to Difficult Decisions

Sermon for the 21st Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Matthew 10: 34-39



³⁴ *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Most Muslims become Christians because they think that Christianity, unlike Islam, is a religion of peace. And with Jesus, you actually can’t detect any political ambitions, political intrigues, or any military strategies through which He could use to overthrow the world. And that’s why, for example, Jesus tells Peter to lay aside his sword as he wanted to defend Jesus from the Roman soldiers. And yet, Jesus says in our text today that He hasn’t come to bring peace but a sword. What does Jesus mean with this word “sword”? In those days, a sword could mean the physical sword that one would use in war as well as also meaning a separation between two opposites. And this second meaning is the one Jesus implies when He says: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Jesus wants to show us that a Christian is radically in conflict with the world and with Satan. And that’s why it isn’t easy to become a Christian or stay a Christian. Instead, it’s a challenge to Satan. And that can hurt! Later on, it becomes clear what Jesus means because Jesus is talking about the fact that one’s own family can stand between us and Jesus. Faith in Jesus can lead to us having to separate ourselves from our earthly family. There are countless examples throughout history where this precise thing happened. To understand Jesus’ words correctly, I must not only think about family but about everything else that separates me from God. Life with God can mean that I must give up such things. And that hurts! Am I ready to separate myself from the things that I like the most so that I may belong to Jesus? Jesus’ words actually pierce our heart and places difficult challenges before us. I’d like to explain that today with an example: a woman explained how she had become addicted to alcohol. At first, she didn’t notice that she had a problem. She just consumed alcohol on a regular basis. But gradually, she needed even more of it until she finally had to constantly drink to satisfy the craving. Terrible depression came with this. She knew that her life was destroyed and yet she didn’t have the strength to quit drinking. Her path to relief was a long wandering in

the desert and she needed help. Only when she lay completely powerless on the floor did she finally cry out: "Jesus, help!" This woman was helped. Her path to recovery was long and difficult. Jesus warns His followers right from the beginning that it will be so. And that applies not just to addicts but to all of us. Because whoever follows Jesus didn't make an easy decision. Whoever follows Jesus even started a war with Satan. And Satan will naturally try anything to hurt Christians. That's why Jesus' words hit at the core of our life and ask us the question, what is actually the most important thing?

And what are your priorities in life? Whoever follows Jesus can't half-heartedly do so. Whoever follows Jesus experiences a turning point in life that separates us from everyone else. This turning point is not new and is already defined in the First Commandment. God didn't say something like: "I am the Lord your God, but you can also have other gods besides me!" No, God said the opposite and He placed a sword between us and everyone else when He said: "I am the Lord your God and you should have no other gods besides me!" Belief in God separates us from other gods and also from all other things that separate us from God. And Jesus also didn't say: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life...but if you want, you can also seek out your own way!" Jesus' words about the sword shows us that following Him can be not only painful but it can also be that I experience an extreme break with the things that separate me from God. In all these places, Jesus' sword must show us that following Jesus isn't a game. Faith in God and following Jesus can mean an extreme separation from your previous life. Following Jesus can be just as radical a step as the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt. It can mean that you turn your back to all the things that you knew before and go forth into a completely new and unknown life. It can also be that this path is a wandering in the desert, where you must suffer; where you are despised by friends and family. It can even mean that we must face death. And the question that is asked is this: "How can you even do that?" How can you change your life? And how can you bear this desert wandering where you experience nothing but suffering? If I understand the words of Jesus correctly, all He wants is our happiness and peace. Jesus also doesn't want to just comfort us with a life in heaven. He also wants us to be happy here on earth. Jesus knows our desire. He knows that we search for happiness and contentment here on earth. He knows that we have a desire to be loved and accepted. God Himself created these things within us. And that's why these things aren't bad. It isn't bad to care about an apartment, an education, or a better life. God wants it that way. But Jesus knows that our desire for life and worth also has a terrible downside. And that's that we lose exactly what we strive for. The feeling of wanting to be loved can deteriorate into an unnatural need for recognition. As I obsessively search after being loved, I nearly lose my best friends! In our desire to mean something, we become ice cold and don't shy away from hurting other people just to make ourselves look better. And in the end, we remain lonely. Our desire to have a happy and healthy life can deteriorate into a selfish and greedy life. That's what a life without God looks like. It is an unnatural pursuit of self and in contradictory ways, we lose exactly what we want the most. We not only lose ourselves but also God. To understand Jesus correctly, we must pay attention to the end of His little speech because Jesus says there: "Whoever loses his

life for my sake will find it!" So it's not about losing. On the contrary, Jesus wants us to win! In the end, it's about our prize. In the end, Jesus wants nothing but happiness, joy, and love. And that's what Jesus wants for us. Following Jesus is not a sad thing but an extremely joyous thing that also gives us peace. Jesus doesn't want to take away our happiness and enjoyment of life, rather He wants to increase our happiness.

When Jesus shows us the example of the sword, He doesn't want in any way for the sword to injure or hurt us. He wants to free us from ourselves even more. He wants to show us where true life is. And to do this, it's necessary to precisely distinguish and ask the question: "Which of my desires come from the Old Adam and my sins. And which of my desires come from God?" The separation between the Old Adam and the New Creation in Christ can hurt. Jesus Himself suffered this pain on His own body. Jesus is fundamentally and by nature the complete opposite to everything evil and to Satan himself. And we know the result of this encounter between Satan and Jesus. It was His horrible death on the cross. Satan cannot help but want to destroy this Jesus. But just as Jesus sacrifices Himself and dies, He destroys the walls that are between us and God. If that makes my own personal desert wandering in this world seem impossible and if I don't know how I can free myself from Satan, then I need only to look to this cross. From this I draw incomprehensible power to see what is in me and also to see what is in Jesus. There on the cross, I see very clearly the darkness of my own heart and the light of God. It is there on the cross that I notice for the first time that there is not a single reason to separate myself from this Jesus. Because in Him and with Him, I am the victor. In Him, I find life! Amen.