

June 28, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Matthew 10:26–39](#)

TITLE: Fear, Faith & Life

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Some mornings you wake up and throw open the curtains to see a warm sun and blue sky. You sing the old church camp song, “Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory.” You quote Psalm 118 and say “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Some mornings are Matthew 5 mornings: “Blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

But some mornings are hard. Some mornings are Matthew 10 mornings. In Matthew 10, Jesus gathered together his followers and sent them out to talk about God power and justice. He told them to go out and cure the sick, cleanse the lepers, and make the world a better place. Don’t take gold, silver, insurance policies, or extra changes of clothes. Rely on others’ hospitality. Stay where you’re welcome but move on when you’re rejected. And then Jesus got real with them. He told them sometimes you will be dragged before judges and politicians to explain yourselves. Siblings will betray siblings; parents will speak against children and children against parents. Such is the world around you, but as you go out into it, don’t be afraid, for God is with you.

The gospel of Christ is an all-time gospel about an all-time God. Some days you sleep peacefully through the night, and you wake up refreshed, with a smile on your face and a psalm of praise on your lips. There are other times when you are suddenly awake in the night—and if you lie there for a moment, whatever is troubling you comes to mind once more. Maybe it was hearing a doctor say the word “cancer” in reference to you or someone you love. Maybe it was hearing your partner wanting a divorce or how your job has been eliminated. But remember: God is God for both our sunny mornings and our sleepless nights, whether we wake up thinking about Matthew 5 blessings or Matthew 10 warnings about fear, about faith, and about life. Let’s explore what Jesus is saying to us today.

I’ve discovered over the years that a lot of parental communication involves questions shouted at the back of a child’s head. Your son or daughter is heading out the door when you shout, “Hey, did you remember your homework? Do you have your lunch? Do you have that signed permission slip, your house key, your jacket because it’s going to rain later?” The kids get older and you still shout, “Do you have your work uniform, your driver’s license? What time will you be home?” We live in a time of a pandemic so we shout, “Don’t forget your mask, remember to wash your hands, and stay 6 feet apart!”

We shout these reminders because we want our kids to be safe out there in the world. Other times we need to sit them down and give them some version of “the talk.” Lots of attention has recently been focused on the need within families of color to give “the talk” to young boys and girls about America’s persistent racism—teaching children how to walk and act especially if they interact with police; warning them about how racism causes others to fear and diminish their God-given beauty, so staying careful is now synonymous with staying alive. In addition to that talk, there are the talks parents give to daughters about protecting their bodies, about never letting someone bring you a drink

at a party, about keeping car keys close as you go to your car, about the grim reality of domestic violence and rape. There are the talks parents give to sons about stepping back from peer pressure that tries to define manhood by risks taken, that welcomes drugs or alcohol abuse as part of normal party behavior, that forgets that “no” truly means “no.” and that reminds them never to doubt their own self-worth just because someone is bigger or stronger or faster than them.

We may not like Matthew 10 mornings or the necessity of having to give these talks to those we love. But silence on these subjects is both dangerous and unloving. We may not like hearing Jesus talk in Matthew 10 about divisions in families—of children against parents, parents split from kids, households torn apart—but we know such things exist. We’ve seen families split in messy divorces, torn apart by hurt feelings about who inherited what after the death of a parent. We know there is much that divides us in our world today and a lot of it is built around fear – the fear of admitting we were wrong and having to ask forgiveness of someone else, the fear right now about losing our health insurance amidst the spread of an invisible virus; the fear of more LGBT oppression, of job uncertainties in a troubled economy, of four more years of political gridlock and acrimony, of racism and injustice becoming a sad legacy we pass on to the next generation. Fear can only be cast out by honest talks.

A father was driving in a car with his two children, aged 13 and 11, on the morning after the 2016 election when they asked him what had happened. It took him a while to answer them, to decide how to frame a response about a subject painful for so many. Finally he said that one of the most important questions you have to answer for yourself is this one: Do I believe in loving everyone? Or do I only believe in loving myself and my people? He went on to say that for himself and their mother, they believed in trying to love everyone. Some people don’t make that same choice and that’s just the way things are. And as a father he can’t make his kids decide how they would answer that question; it was something they’d have to answer for themselves.¹

Honest talks like that one are necessary, because without them, we are too often guided by our fears—and fear can make us believe crazy things. Fear whispers that immigrants diminish our American identity, when almost all of us are products of immigration and statistically more than ½ of all American Nobel Prize winners are either immigrants or children of immigrants themselves.² Fear tells us that change is impossible at worst or snail-paced slow at best. But back in 1972, Australia voted in a new government and within 19 days they had repudiated decades-long racist policies that defined their land as a whites-only nation, and within a few months they increased the minimum wage, lowered the voting age to 18, abolished university fees, and required equal pay for women.³ If you don’t think change can happen quickly in America, you need to re-read about the first 100 days of FDR’s “New Deal” initiatives.

Some think that fear arises when our bodies tell us we need to step back and withdraw, because we’re getting too close to danger. But in truth, fear is a sign that we’re withdrawing too much: when we let capitalism run wild and shrink our government’s necessary capacities to care for the marginal and vulnerable; when we pull back from international alliances during a global pandemic when we need those partnerships; when we celebrate a strong stock market that is built on the greedy foundation of fossil

fuels extracted from national parks or burnt down Amazon forests. Fear puts money into police SWAT team equipment but withdraws it from social workers and mental-health providers.

That's why in Matthew 10, to counteract the language of fear, Jesus offers the language of faith. "Have no fear of them; be not afraid. Now is the time for hidden things to be named, shadowy prejudices to be denounced openly, and secret sins to be exposed in the bright light of justice. This gospel is to be shouted from the housetops—a message about a God who knows our hearts and our every deed, the very number of hairs on our head, and who will not stand for denials of what is just, loving and true any longer."

William Sloan Coffin was a modern prophet and preacher at Riverside Church in New York City. Pam Driesell tells how almost 50 years ago, Coffin preached a sermon on Matthew 10 and in that message he called for nuclear disarmament. He insisted that it is time for Christ's message of peace to be proclaimed from the rooftops—even if it meant using a sword of justice. He went on to explain how those two contrary images could work together. Christ's sword is a sword of truth. Yes, it cuts and lays bare, but it also heals the very wounds it inflicts.⁴ That's why scripture talks of it as a two-edged sword. Like a scalpel it removes what harms the body, even as it brings healing that leads to restored life.

Some mornings are Matthew 5 mornings—sunshine, blue skies, beatitudes for all us humble sheep of the Lord's flock. Some mornings are Matthew 10 mornings—calls to go out into the world to speak without fear about a truth that must be spoken and a hope that is stronger than death. God knows we will face both types of mornings—Good Friday dark days, Easter Sunday resurrection mornings. Thankfully our God is God of all times, all days, and all people, including us—sheep of God's fold, sparrows of God's loving care, disciples of Christ one and all. Go now to live this life of faith—and be not afraid.

AMEN

¹ Carvell Wallace, "Facing the Wind," *New York Times Magazine*, June 21, 2020, p. 46.

² Jared Diamond, *Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis*, 2019, p. 340.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁴ *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew*, vol. 1, *Matthew 10:34-39*, "Pastoral Perspective" by Pam Driesell, p. 274. (Sermon by W.S. Coffin "Not to Bring Peace, But a Sword.")