

Fear and Secrecy: Matthew 10:26-33
Reflection for Baltimore Carmel *Lectio*, June 21, 2020

Today's reflection is a theme and variation on fear and secrecy. Fear. Secrecy. They are often related. We fear people will learn our secrets, secrets about our past or our interior life. So our volitional choices can lead us to fear. However, for no fault of their own, some of our brothers and sisters live daily with fear--- all their lives. If we have been attentive, we have learned something about fear in the last 4 months. In today's gospel Jesus says, "No fear. No secrets" to a community which had reasons to be fearful not unlike ours: unjust treatment from those who were supposed to protect them, military occupation in their streets.

To understand this text we need insight into its context: its external context, the time, place, and audience for which it was written, and its internal context, where the passage occurs in the structure of the whole gospel.

The External Context

Just as Paul wrote to particular communities with particular problems, evangelists wrote gospels *for* particular communities with particular challenges. Pastoral concerns shaped how they told Jesus' story. Matthew writes after Mark, before John, ca. 85 AD when "Jesus Jews" were leaving the synagogue where they had belonged and worshipped. Several scholars suggest Matthew's gospel was a Christian response to massive changes after the Temple's destruction in 70 AD and Judaism's subsequent reformulation. Christians for whom Matthew was telling Jesus' story were formerly in the synagogue and now out, coming to terms with what they had been and who they now were. The external context of Matthew is of insiders who became outsiders charged to deliver a message that challenged the status quo.

The Internal Context

Matthew's gospel, which is full of references to Hebrew scripture, is framed by the infancy (1-2) and Passion narratives (26-28), the body of the gospel has five sections (a new Pentateuch) each containing a narrative and discourse/sermon of Jesus. The Five Discourses are the Sermon on the Mount (5-7), the "Missionary Discourse" (10), the Parables Discourse (11-13), the "Community Regulations" Discourse (18), and the Apocalyptic Discourse (23/24-25). Each ends with the formula "When Jesus had finished..."

Our Gospel is in the Missionary Discourse. In 10:1-4, Jesus calls the Twelve apostles by name. "These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions..." (10:5), daunting instructions: preach, cure, raise the dead---all for free. Don't take money, extra clothes, sandals, or a walking stick with you. Wherever you land up, stay in the first house that invites you. "I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves" (10:16) with no stick to beat them off. You are going to be handed over to officials and beaten up. (Sounds eerily familiar.) Remember you are to be like me, your teacher, (remember Matthew's audience knew Jesus' end) If you stick it out, you'll be saved. "So have no fear..." (10:26) Yeah. Right.

Our text is the spacial center of this disquieting discourse. Three times in 8 verses Jesus says "do not fear," suggesting there must have been things *to* fear. But fear of people or persecution was not to hamper the work of witness. Three times he commends open-ness rather

than secrecy (vv. 26, 27, and 32) suggesting that there was secrecy and that it was problematic for the mission.

Don't Fear

The background of the command “do not fear” is the disciples being sent out to proclaim his message in an environment opposed to it, for different reasons, but by both religious and political authorities. The first “have no fear” follows the disciple’s likeness to their abused teacher. If he was, they will be. But they are not to fear because 1. What is hidden will be revealed; 2. The persecutors can’t kill what is eternal about personhood; 3. Jesus’ followers are valuable to God.

The first “don’t fear” addresses the fact that things aren’t always as they appear, but truth will be uncovered or revealed. This is one of Jesus’ most highly attested sayings, appearing in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and twice in non-biblical “The Gospel of Thomas:” “...nothing is hidden that won’t be revealed” and “...nothing covered up that will remain undisclosed.” (5, 6) More on this shortly.

Second, “don’t fear those who can kill the body, but not the soul,” suggests serious persecution. One doesn’t tell people not to do what they aren’t doing. Half way through his public ministry, does Jesus intuit where it will end? The “soul,” the psyche, was life’s vital principle, the seat of thoughts and emotions, what Thomas Merton in *New Seeds of Contemplation* described as the “True Self.” The good news is that what is essential about humans is indestructible. Only God could destroy both body and soul because God made both.

The third “don’t fear” follows from the second. The disciples should not fear because God cares continually about what God has made. Sparrows were common, inexpensive food, two for an *assarion*, about half a penny. Jesus liked little birdies, and often used them as illustrations. Twice in the creation stories in Genesis God makes birds (1:20, 2:19). Here, the Creator of birds is their Sustainer. The laws of nature are not outside the mercies of God. Jesus is a realist. Sparrows *do* fall to the ground, but even the most ordinary birds, are not beyond God’s notice. Surely those who follow and proclaim God’s Son are more valuable than sparrows.

Nothing Secret

Jesus knows the world into which he is sending his friends, and their tendency to fear when “what is said in the ear,” is proclaimed from the housetops (which is how public announcements were made). Because we are an individualistic, not a communal culture, we tend to interpret this matter of hidden/revealed at the personal level. An ethical principle in my youth was “if you can’t do it openly, you shouldn’t do it.” If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear. Not bad ideas, but what is at issue in the Missionary Discourse goes beyond personal morality to communal religious practice.

In several religions in the Greco-Roman world, secrecy was the norm. For example, the Mystery Religions were mysteries because their esoteric lore wasn’t taught until one “joined up,” was initiated. The internal teachings of the Jewish Essene community involved secrecy. The Way of Jesus was to be open, transparent. But there were reasons why being secretive was a temptation for followers sent on mission. Perhaps if Jesus Jews weren’t too

public about their faith they could continue in the synagogue. Maybe if they didn't proclaim Jesus' message in the *agora* the Romans would leave them alone.

The language of dark and light, hidden and proclaimed was about the safety of believers. That's why fear and secrecy are concurrent in the Missionary Discourse. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, his message was to be proclaimed, not hidden, put on a lamp stand, not under a basket. Jesus' message is not a message of darkness, but of light, because He is the Light. It is not a matter of secrecy, but of public proclamation because, as Paul told the Roman Christians "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (*sodzo* means both "saved" and "healed.") But how are people to do this "without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?" (Romans 10: 13-15)

The passage closes with the End is in view. Disciples must acknowledge Jesus publically, proclaim (*omologeō* means to confess, admit, to endorse someone's claims, agree with them), him fearlessly and openly. Three times Jesus calls God "Father in Heaven," echoing the prayer he taught in the Sermon on the Mount and highlighting the startling idea that relationship with God is familial, intimate, available. The Our Father teaches us to pray for what we need now. The close of today's gospel teaches that how we live now determines our ultimate future. The very sobering note of judgment with which the text closes echoes many judgment passages in Matthew's gospel

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? I hope hollering Jesus from the housetops. But we probably acknowledge Jesus (or don't) more eloquently by how we live, by what we do than by what we say. Where ever we are, our lives either proclaim the Lordship of Jesus, or keep it secret. And Jesus repeatedly tells disciples what's ultimately going to happen regarding secrets.

I think the Good News of this passage is Our Lord's view of God: how God the Creator is God the Sustainer, how what is essential about human beings endures, how Our Lord again offers the astonishing privilege of addressing His Father as ours. A gospel hymn of my youth proclaimed, "His eye is on the sparrow/And I know he watches me." Everyone needs this kind of security, and it is up to us to offer it by fearlessly, openly proclaiming its Source and living by it ourselves. Today's gospel returns us to the first Easter evening with the disciples who were "locked for fear." (John 20: 19) To them Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20: 21)

[See Psalm 78: 1-4]

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