

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

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*III Pentecost, Matthew 10:24-39*

*Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth;  
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Thinking of our seniors we celebrated last week and all the unusual commencements of these pandemic days, I recalled my own Captain Shreve High School, where, just inside the office lobby [to the left], lived a small library of literature from colleges, universities, and vocational schools. Built-in bookshelves lined the walls of this windowless room, with just enough space between them to hang posters advertising the different programming options available to the recent high school graduate. By way of some shenanigans I do not remember, a particularly powerful Army promotion – featuring a happy young man with a feathered mullet that, in time, would make even MacGyver proud – found its way to my bedroom closet at my parents' house. The guy in this ad carries a medium-sized backpack which appears heavy enough to suggest that he's challenged, but light enough to reassure that he is not overwhelmed. Several dutifully collegiate, brick buildings set the image's horizon behind him, and the tear-away forms at the bottom of the poster promise financial assistance in exchange for military enrollment.

Also in that library, a roil of course catalogues decorated the round table in the room's center. The pictures on the front of these suggested that, regardless of one's college choice, undergraduate work would make my classmates and me increasingly attractive, given to fits of uproarious laughter, and surround us with good-looking, chortling friends. Moreover, it seemed that a great deal of our university life would be spent walking under distinguished oaks, shoulder-to-shoulder with these teeth-whitened peers, and at the end of every sidewalk and stone-paved passage, clock towers would rise out of the earth and aim their hands to heaven.

With the benefit of a freshman year – moons ago though it was – I recognize now the ridiculous disconnect between the subtle and not-so-subtle promises these advertisements offered, and the realities many matriculates will discover in college, and, in time, in the real world (so-called). So I have imagined what more truthful advertising might look like: instead of the tidy dorm room with the safely curious roommate reclining on his neatly made bed and reading Nietzsche, perhaps pages describing residential life on campus should be scratch-and-sniff, with pictures of dirty laundry and moist athletic wear appropriately scented. Or maybe packages of Raman noodles emblazoned with a university seal or ballcaps printed with federal payroll-tax deduction percentages would do the trick.

This same consumerist culture sets faith communities within a marketplace, charging us to compete – like a commodity – for the Christian household. Therefore, our congregations commit to a promotional competition not unlike college admissions, all within an economy of avocations:

resourced churches *advertise* for ministries, rather than share in meaningful vocational discernment;

“Prosperity” liars *market* the Gospel, rather than preach it;

and sermon messages cosset uncritical convictions, rather than inspire new ideas.

Further, these pandemic days have dislodged parishes from the “markets” of their immediate neighborhoods, compelling congregations to produce “From Home” experiences that compete with churches from all over the country. After all, in these days, churchgoers need not limit their worship options to experiences they can reach by-foot or by-car – which could be a gift! – our fellowship enriched by new companions and new perspectives, Thanks be to God! Yet, on the other side of the curtain and computer screen, pressure builds for us to emphasize sparkle, rather than soul – signage, rather than substance – in ways **eye-catching enough to attract an audience, rather than nurture a Beloved Community** ... to *attract an audience*, rather than *nurture a Beloved Community*.

As a result, we torque the Good News in service of the culture’s expectations, because some of Jesus’ instructions simply will not compete in any marketplace. In some moments, many moments – *most* moments – Jesus just isn’t all that marketable.

Take this morning’s appointment and try to imagine how Jesus’ words might be pitched in a Guidance Counselor’s library poster: a picture of two happy fisherfolk walking shoulder-to-shoulder down a dusty path (each wearing one tunic and carrying no extra sandals, of course), a lead caption scripted in the style of an *Indiana Jones* movie reads: “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves ... Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them”<sup>i</sup> ... Discipleship Fever: *Catch It!*

Or how about the image of a family supper table, heads bowed in prayer before a meek spread of bread and fish, and in hot pink, flashing neon, a sign above this melancholy scene blinks: “Brother will betray brother ... a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name”<sup>ii</sup> ... Follow Jesus: *It’s fun for the whole family!*

Matthew's Missionary Discourse – launched last week, continued today – does not record how the disciples became better and better looking with each new convert they brought to the faith. Instead of a recruitment appeal with conveniently perforated, tear-away interest tabs, Jesus commissions his friends with a frank appraisal of what their service of God's Kingdom will require, modeling the costly work of leadership: telling the *truth*, even though that truth is a hard word to speak, a harder word to hear, an even more difficult word to realize. Yet, Jesus' honesty confirms the disciples' dignity and blesses their vocation with their Teacher's trust.

As they prepare for these mission fields' wilds, Jesus continues: "have no fear [of those who oppose you, and] ... Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body."<sup>iii</sup> Jesus – who will be crucified – understands it will be the disciples' very peaceableness and innocence that provoke the worst and most desperate in some they seek to love and serve. Within such a persecutory environment, he asks the disciples to "fear" God, and not any worldly adversary, to keep their hearts oriented always, always toward God's good hopes.

Importantly, the same Greek verb rendered here as "fear," Luke employs in the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord ... His mercy is for those who *fear* him from generation to generation."<sup>iv</sup> Despite the frightful imagery of today's appointment, Jesus, as in Mary's song, encourages the disciples to *revere* God – not in cowered fright, but in pledge to the greater promises ... not the worldly affirmations and easy answers – bleached smiles and oak boughs – but to the fulfillment of God's dream: when *all* are saved from themselves, when *all* are risen from dust and despair, when *all ... are ... one!*

Let us, then, keep these means, ends, and priorities sorted as we hear Jesus' troublesome pronouncement: "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."<sup>v</sup> Be clear, friends: this is not a call to arms, but a call to higher vision and greater love – the only sword Jesus wields is the sword of righteousness! And though the disciples' mission will be demanding and their affirmations will be few, Jesus promises to cut away from them any smugery of prospective martyrdom entitlements they might presume to take upon themselves:

*How dare you think yourselves holier than your father or mother, your brother or sister! Remember: this ministry is ... not ... about ... you! ... but always about the welfare of those you serve and the good of the whole world. Therefore, I call you into those most intimate, most complex relationships with those you love most and those who most love you. And I pray you stay there – in disagreement, frustration, and conflict – you stay there. For until the Kingdom comes, the reconciliation of all people to God and to one another will not be complete ... the work of antiracism will not be complete ... the work of equitable economic opportunity will not be complete ... the work of a peaceable world will not be fulfilled. And between now and then, do not accept worldly excuses that distract you from my vision. See: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."<sup>vi</sup>*

That we would lose ourselves in justice, mercy, and Love, I pray in the name of God,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 10:16-18.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 10:21-22.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 10:26,28.

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 1:46-50.

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 10:34.

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 10:39.