

# A CRISIS OF LOYALTY: GOD'S PRESENCE AND CALL

---

**Ernest F. Krug, III**

**Third Presbyterian Church**

**June 25, 2017**

**Matthew 10: 24-39**

Many of you know that I returned recently from two weeks in Israel on a pilgrimage organized by the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. We visited many holy sites and learned a lot of Biblical and modern history about a region that has been occupied by foreign powers for most of the past 2,500 years, culminating in the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. As you probably know, this resulted in hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs being expelled from the land and their homes destroyed. Today, Palestinian Arabs live for the most part in the West Bank and Gaza, unable to receive Israeli citizenship and barred from traveling on highways reserved for Israelis. A high concrete wall keeps Arabs and Israelis separated with multiple checkpoints through which individuals must pass and be screened, even as they travel back and forth to work on a daily basis. It is no surprise that there is a sense of oppression and loss of homeland among the Palestinian Arab population. During the pilgrimage we heard from a Palestinian Christian who directs the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Nazareth. He told us about his parents, who are Greek Orthodox. His mother is a devout Christian and never misses attending Mass. His father, on the other hand, has stopped attending church. He cannot stand to hear the Scripture readings that speak about the favored position of Israel in the sight of God and the restoration of Zion. He and other Palestinians feel oppressed and beaten down by an Israeli government that has occupied their land and taken away their dignity. So, is this Palestinian Christian's mother clearly the one demonstrating loyalty to Christ and his father not? We'll get back to this question.

Looking at this morning's Matthew passage, we see that Jesus is talking about the cost of discipleship. Jesus' disciples were under attack

and risked death if they acknowledged Jesus as Messiah, the Christ. These risks and threats caused some families to be divided as persons chose between loyalty to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and loyalty to family. Even Jesus' own family tried to dissuade him from his ministry. Family tension over the Gospel was true then; do you believe this could be true today? What about these two words: disciple and discipleship? A disciple is a learner, and discipleship is a process. Jesus emphasizes that to be a disciple is to take up the Cross and follow Him. It is truly a learned discipline with ups and downs along the way. Jesus tells his disciples that it is associated with suffering and loss. Yet they and we are assured of God's presence and the importance of God's call.

Now we all have our personal crosses. For some it may be financial stresses; for others, family discord or mental health issues or progressive disability. There are many, many "crosses" that stretch us out, immobilize us, and make us completely vulnerable. These are serious and sometimes tragic life events, and they can consume us. They are real and personal, and I am certain the first disciples struggled with these, as we do. How to be resilient in the face of these threats to our personal integrity is worthy of its own sermon. However, I want to focus today on what it means to "take up the cross," that is, the cross of Jesus Christ. What is this cross and how does it affect the choices we make?

Thomas Long writes in his commentary on this passage: "It is simply a fact that the gospel shakes up values, rearranges priorities, reorients goals" (*Matthew*, p. 122). That is what the cross does. We grow up learning and acquiring certain values and setting priorities to help insure our success in life. The cross brings different demands—sometimes compatible and sometimes in conflict with values we hold dear. The scripture makes a troubling claim: God wants us to be servants of God's plan for the world, not masters of our own destiny. We are to trust that God knows each one of us down to the hairs on our heads and wants us to be in regular conversation with God about God's intentions for this world and our part in that. There is no one we need fear, there is no loyalty, even to family, that exceeds the loyalty we owe to Jesus Christ and the priorities symbolized by the cross. That is a tall order because it requires us to resist anything that violates God's love for all persons and for God's creation.

So the cross is this terrible burden of being God's love in this world—a commitment to God's presence and call. Consider what taking

up the cross means in your daily life. In business it might mean resisting the claim that market forces are sufficient for God when God's desire is to embrace every individual and restore healing community where persons have been excluded. In our social interactions it might mean proclaiming the love of God when we witness mocking contempt for another person or class of persons. In the church it might mean being intentional about inclusion even though certain others make us feel uncomfortable and appear to confirm our biases. And consider this: we may not, as Jesus warned the early disciples in Matthew 10, verse 18, be "dragged before governors and kings" because our belief in Christ targets us as terrorists, but we can sympathize with Muslims whose belief in Muhammad unfairly targets them as terrorists. To take up the cross means to identify with "the other," whomever that might be, and take their pain upon oneself and respond with love. That becomes a sign of God's presence and call.

You will find a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the cover of the bulletin. He was serious about loyalty to Jesus and the gospel requirement to love others as family, and it cost him his life. He loved the Jews who were being vilified and murdered; he also loved the German guards who kept him confined in prison. To have this kind of love at the cost of one's life feels like too great a demand. For many, grace means simply that God loves us, and we should get the most that we can out of a world that is nasty and brutish. But discipleship demands a different attitude. It requires us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, even when we feel threatened, harassed, or persecuted. It means, says Thomas Long "to give one's life away in the name of Christ" and that "makes life free, holy, and good" (*Ibid*). Now we hear this word, loyalty, thrown around a lot lately—loyalty to a person, loyalty to a system, loyalty to a cause. In our own day we experience a crisis of loyalty. There are threats all around us, and we are asked to make choices every day that reflect where our ultimate loyalty lies. To take up the cross means to place greater value on Christ's love for the world than on our own self-worth in the eyes of others. Regardless of our own limitations and disabilities, God calls us into service to be part of God's transformation of this world by and through the love of Christ.

Remember the story I began with about the parents of the Palestinian Christian. The mother closed her eyes to the oppression around her and took solace in the liturgy of the Church. The father

rejected the church because it affirmed the value of a people he had come to hate. Which person demonstrates the loyalty to his gospel that Jesus desires? If one believes that Jesus demands non-violent resistance by his disciples to promote care and justice for all people, then neither way takes up the cross. The mother practices piety without discipleship. The father has withdrawn into his own pain and anger. Their son, on the other hand, is involved in non-violent resistance to the oppression experienced by Palestinians and seeks peace with justice in spite of it being so elusive. He directs the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in order to be a voice for Jesus' love. He strives to recognize the pain and humanity of those with differing viewpoints through education and conversation. He conveys hopefulness based on faith in God's presence and God's call. He demonstrates his acceptance of the claim that Christ makes on each one of us to be a faithful disciple—learning each day to trust that one's life is in God's hands. Jesus sends us into the midst of this world's hostilities to resist the status quo and contribute to healing, justice, and peace. The love of Christ is expansive. It requires a commitment to inclusion when we discover individuals who are left out; it requires a commitment to justice when we observe that an economic and legal system favors some and leaves others in poverty and without hope; it requires a commitment to kindness wherever we perceive hatred and rejection; and it requires a commitment to humility when we would prefer to exert our own influence and interests. A challenge to all of us this morning is to repent of privilege and look with fresh eyes for the cross that we are called to take up as disciples of Jesus Christ. May this happen to God's glory. Amen