

“DO NOT BE AFRAID!”

**Jeremiah 20:7-13, Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:5a, 21-33
Pentecost 2, Proper 7-A**

Our Gospel lesson this morning from the 10th chapter of St. Matthew relays to us the second-half of Jesus' instructions to his 12 disciples, just before he sends them out on their first missionary journey! And make no mistake about it! Jesus is being very forthright, honest, and candid with his disciples when he tells them about all the dangers and hardships **they may have to put up**. Next, Jesus brings his teaching to its climax by saying: "What do you expect? A disciple is not greater than his teacher. If the world has me a bad time, even calling me Beelzebub, “the Prince of Demons,” it will give you a hard time too!"

So what does Jesus do next? Does he tell his disciples to go out and purchase a great deal of life insurance? Does he give to each of them a bullet-proof vest? **Does he instruct them to attend an upcoming seminar on how to diffuse conflict?**

Not hardly! Instead he says, "Don't ever be afraid of your enemies and critics. Even though it's not obvious now, the truth will come out finally. So, speak up; shout it out; stand up and deliver the goods new of the kingdom of God boldly to others all around you" (10:26-27)! Oh, my!

But we really don't want to become heroes like that in the world today, do we?

We don't want to be heroes, especially not religious ones. It's all we can do to get to church to worship and attend a Bible study on Sundays, and we're supposed to be outdoors and up there on our rooftops, really, shouting the Word of God to all the other people in our neighborhoods?

There's no way! We're all too afraid! **But Jesus doesn't relinquish his desire for us to become his spokesmen, and spokesmen for our Heavenly Father in this world!** He continues by saying: **"Stop being afraid"** (that's the real force of the verb in the Greek text)! Not just, “Don't be afraid! Believe me, they were already afraid, as we too might be already afraid, but Jesus says: “Stop being afraid!”

Stop being afraid, not just once but always! "Stop being afraid of people that can only kill your body but can never kill your soul!" The point Jesus is making here is that people can hurt us only temporarily; even when they might succeed in killing our physical bodies, because

there really is this wonderful thing awaiting us called life beyond the grave. Jesus is speaking about the eternal life that comes from God. Even if they kill us, God the author of our lives will raise us from the dead at his own appointed hour!

"Don't fear people; fear God" (the one who can kill both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28)! Even though God has this power available to him, he uses his power to save us from our sins instead, becoming first a helpless Baby when he was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Later, at age 33, he who exercised power of all sorts of illness and disease, even death at time, who spoke to the wind and they waves, and they obeyed his voice, willingly, voluntarily, became a weak Man betrayed into the hands of sinners, cruelly treated and mocked by the Jewish authorities as well as the Roman soldier!"

Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus is reminding all of us that often times **the voices of the people all around are not necessarily the voice of God.** We worry way too much about what other people may say or think of us and far too little about what God thinks of us. Yes, but!?! We know this is true! We've heard it before! But, it's easier said than done!

So what's the solution? More advice? More instruction? That's what we would expect. But Jesus is not only a teacher. He is the chief revelation of God to us, though he doesn't stop being a good teacher when he opens a window into God. He says, ***"Aren't sparrows the most common and cheapest bird around? Yet not one of them dies apart from God your Father" (10:29). Wow! "And what about you?"*** Jesus continues: ***"God even knows to the very number, the precise number of hairs upon your head!"***

So stop being afraid. You are of much more value than any sparrow" (10:30-31).

Isn't that amazing? God knows everything that we go through and nothing that happens to us escapes him. Even if we die, it doesn't happen apart from God's allowing it to happen.

And even during those times when Satan tempts us to think of ourselves as people whom God has no totally abandoned, even if God does not seem to listening to our prayers, when everything thing seems hopeless, God knows and God cares.

If that's the case, we can stop being afraid.

Not being afraid, however, is not something that we could bring about within ourselves! As long as we think it is, we will still be afraid -- of other people, of death, of circumstances (real or imagined). But as Jesus reveals it, we can stop being afraid because of a promise -- a promise that God who watches over even the commonest of birds will also take care of us. When someone makes a promise to you, what do you have to do?

If your grandparents write their last will and testament and tell you ahead of time that when they die you will get the farm, what do you have to do to actually receive it? **Be nice to them? Work really hard? Why? They have already promised you the farm. "What do I have to do?" is the wrong response to a promise. It doesn't make sense.**

Because of their goodness and grace towards you, you might be motivated to be especially kind to them, to love them, and help them in any way you can, not because you are seeking to extract something from them, but simply because of their prior love expressed to you, in words and deeds throughout your life!

If you find out you are going to inherit something, you say "Hooray! Wonderful! Thank you!"

Out of the blue you have a retirement plan. Suddenly the future doesn't seem so uncertain.

Most of our lives are not lived out according to the **"logic of a promise,"** but in fulfilling the requirements necessary to achieve important life goals. So often it's true, no one is going to hand you anything on a silver platter; that's not usually the way that life works! What do I have to do if I want to enter a certain profession? What do I have to do if I want to graduate from college and maybe even attend graduate school? What must I do if I want to get a promotion at work? What do I have to do if I want to be respected by other people?

But God's promise to love and care for us is not based upon our performance but upon his own love and prior promise.

In view of the power that God now makes available to us through the Gospel, and the daily guidance of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we hopefully want to serve God and care for other people simply as a true expression to God of our deepest thanks for all that he has done, is doing, and promises yet to do for us. **Hopefully thanksgiving is much more than a calendar affair in your life and mine and not simply restricted to something we do and celebrate on the fourth Thursday of every November.** We are giving thanks to God every day of our lives; and to be a faithful steward of all that he is entrusting to us, will bring about some added blessings as well.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who was born in Germany but who later came to the United States and was a visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He had a wonderful job, living in safety here in the states, but the Spirit of God moved him to go back to Germany and to protest the Nazi movement, and particularly their great mistreatment of the Jewish people. He even became involved with an association of officers in the German Army who believed that the only hope for Germany was to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He was arrested and actually executed just two weeks before the Germans surrendered to the Allied Forces. When he was taken from his prison cell for the last time he said, "This is for some the end of life, but for me the beginning of life!"

Here are a few excerpts from Bonhoeffer's writings: "The Bible, the Gospel, Christ Jesus, the Church, our faith—these are all one great big battle cry against the reality of fear in our lives. Fear is our archenemy. Fear crouches in people's hearts. Fear hollows out our insides, until our resistance and strength are spent and break down altogether in our lives! Fear secretly gnaws and eats away at all that ties a person to God and to others, so that he may eventually sink back into himself; helpless and despairing, while hell rejoices. Fear stares that person in the face, saying: Here you are all by yourself and now I am showing you my true face. And anyone who has seen naked fear revealed, who has been its victim in terrifying loneliness—fear of an important decision; fear of a heavy stroke of fate, fear of losing one's job, fear of an illness; fear of a vice

that one no longer can actually resist; a vice to which one is enslaved; fear of disgrace; fear of another person; fear of dying—that person knows that fear is only one of the faces of evil itself, one form by which the world, at enmity with God, grasps for someone.

But the human being doesn't have to be afraid; we should not be afraid! That is what makes humans different from all other creatures. In the midst of every situation where there seems to be no way out, where nothing is clear, and even when so much that has happened is our own fault, we know that there is hope, and this hope is called: **"Thy will be done, yes, thy will is being done!"**

Do you ask me: How do you know this? Then I must name out loud the name of the only One who can make the evil inside of us recoil, who makes fear and anxiety themselves tremble with fear and puts them to flight. We name the One who overcame fear and led it captive in the victory procession, who nailed it to the cross and committed it to oblivion; we name the One who is the shout of victory of humankind redeemed from the fear of death—Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Living One.

He alone is Lord over fear; it knows him as its master; it gives way to him alone. So look to Christ when you are afraid, think of Christ, keep him before your eyes, call upon Christ and pray to him, believe that he is with you now, helping you. **Then fear will grow pale and fade away, and you will be free, through your faith in our strong and living Savior, Jesus Christ.**

Let's say there is a ship on the high sea, having a fierce struggle with the waves. The storm wind is blowing harder by the minute. The boat is small, tossed about like a toy; the sky is dark; the sailors' strength is failing. Then one of them is gripped! And gripped by whom?

Bonhoeffer does not ask, and gripped by what? Unbelievers will say the sea. But the question is "by whom" and not "by what". Dear friends, a believers dares to believe that this one who has prayed for deliverance is now gripped by the LORD God, who has brought this fearful one into his nearer presence through death!

During the course of our Lord's own life and ministry he made many incredible, far-reaching promises to people: Not only about God knowing every hair on our heads and promising to care for us, but also remember some of the others: *"Today, you will be with me in paradise." "I go to prepare a place for you." "Lo, I am with you always." "I tell you, your sins are forgiven."* **And in his Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12): Those who mourn will be comforted, the meek will inherit the earth, the pure in heart will see God, and so forth.**

At first, when Jesus was crucified, these promises seemed to be all cancelled out. He had failed. He was just a dreamer, one more idealistic prophet making promises he couldn't keep. Even his disciples no longer followed. In the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke they are nowhere to be seen at the crucifixion. **"All of them deserted him and fled" (Mark 14:50).** And Peter denied even knowing Jesus.

Is the Gospel only a dream then? Is it just an illusion? Is it only a possible piece of some helpful fiction; to help people die more serenely.

It would have been just that if Jesus' death were the end of the story. But God raised Jesus. God made sure that Jesus could keep his promises. Even death (our death) will not keep

Jesus from keeping the promises he makes to us in the Bible, because we die with him and we will be raised with him. That's a promise. And it's the basis for our hope in all the other promises. Even the sparrows don't fall to the ground apart from God the Father and we are of greater value than many sparrows.

Today this same crucified and risen Lord is in our midst, allowing us to stop being afraid because of the powerful love of God on which the promise is based: ***"Even the hairs of your head are all counted; you are of more value than many sparrows."***

Jesus makes us an even greater promises; a promise that becomes visible for us through eyes of faith, when we ask him to bless our Table, his Table, at which he the Host shares with us his honored guests, the gift of his very own body and blood in our lives; the gift of his real presence to strengthen our faith and to encourage us and to empower us to become bolder witnesses to others in this sinful world too!

The promise continues in the Blessed Sacrament as we hear Jesus say that "this bread is my body, given for you, and "this wine is my blood, shed for you." We receive Christ in the bread and wine because he promises to meet us there. In this sacrament the promise is visible and touchable and feelable and tastable. "Take and eat; take and drink." As we do this in remembrance of him, we can stop being afraid.] Amen.