

Four Links in the Chain of Salvation

Matthew 10:34-42

Proper 8-A, July 2, 2017

It certainly is no secret to anyone here this morning—that on this **coming Tuesday July 4, we will hopefully celebrate the 241st Birthday of our nation with millions of other Americans!**

It will also be a day for us to commemorate the great courage our founding fathers possessed who bravely signed the DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE—in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776.

It could hopefully be a time also when we will remember that the **Continental Congress**, who on that day declared the **Thirteen American Colonies** to now be a **new nation**—called—this new nation the **“United States of America;”** and signifying that the **thirteen American colonies would no longer regard themselves to be any longer to be a part of the British Empire!**

Yet, how do we as the **American people celebrate our Independence Day?** Of course there are a few **political speeches and ceremonies here and there**—but this also a day that has **routinely become marked with parades and barbecues, picnics and concerts, family reunions and a fireworks display in the evening!** — (By the way, if you have never gone to see the fireworks display at **Fort Jackson**, you should go this year! It is so spectacular that the word **“spectacular”** doesn't properly describe it!)

ONE THING we should never forget, however, is what a **tough choice it was for all of the British people living in the Thirteen Colonies at that time!** Those who were in favor of breaking away from the *British Crown* were named the **“Revolutionaries!”** And those who were committed to remaining connected to *“Jolly Old England”* back home—across the Atlantic Ocean were called—the **“Loyalists!”**

It certainly was not an easy decision for any of those colonists to make! And because it wasn't, a great many of those colonists **vacillated back and forth—as to which side of that all-important decision** they wished to be on! Historians remind us that some people were **constantly changing their minds and switching back and forth between being “revolutionaries” and “loyalists”** throughout the Revolutionary War!

When you and I listen closely to the words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson this morning, we are reminded that his call to discipleship constantly places before his hearers some tough choices too, although to some people these words of our Savior seem to be completely out of character for him! Nevertheless, our Lord was forthright when he said: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword! For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household” (Matthew 10:34-36)?

Say what, Jesus? Are we hearing you correctly this morning, Jesus?

Yet the very fact that Jesus begins this proclamation with his words: **“Do not think . . .”** indicates to us that our Lord was challenging a *prevailing attitude* among those who had any kind of association with him up to this point, or not! Jesus is correcting a great *misnomer* here!

But, then again, how in the world could these words of our Savior ring true, when the Prophet Isaiah foretold us centuries before our Savior's birth that one of the names by which he would be called is “The Prince of

Peace” (Isaiah 9:6)! Besides this, in his beatitudes—our Lord had recently declared, *“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God”* (Matthew 5:9)! And if our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ did not come into this world to bring us peace, how in the world could the Apostle Paul ever have made that bold proclamation that he does in a letter that he sent to his friends in Rome one day saying: *“Therefore, being justified by faith we are at peace with our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access into this grace in which we now stand”* (Romans 5:1)!?

Brothers and sisters, it is not that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ wanted his good news of the coming of God’s kingdom into our world—to in any way—bring about any of these kinds of sharp divisions and disruptions—that would unfortunately—result in fracturing human families—but our Lord, who was in the very embodiment and therefore the divine Incarnation of all true Wisdom—knew that “throwing down the gauntlet” on any important matters in this life always forces people to choose sides!

For this same reason Jesus also remarked one day: *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money”* (Matthew 6:24)!

Here Jesus was—simply acknowledging a truth—that no one could deny—that those people who came to regard him as the long-awaited and promised Messiah—would, no doubt, find themselves at complete odds with those people who were going to reject that notion altogether! Therefore our Savior said: *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword! For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household”* (Matthew 10:34-36)!

Both Matthew and Luke, in their respective Gospel accounts, tell us about Jesus sending his twelve disciples out on their first missionary journey—but unlike Luke, Matthew makes no mention of the actual missionary activity of these disciples at all!

From Matthew’s Gospel, we cannot readily assume that these men accepted Jesus’ challenge or not, though from Luke’s Gospel, we know that they did, which leaves some theologians to believe that Matthew curtails his account—primarily for the purpose of warning his first readers of his Gospel account—that such divisions could occur and that tough choices would have to be made!

Just as families in the American colonies were split and fractured by the tough choices they would be forced to make—whether or not they were in favor risking some bloody warfare that would result in the birth of a new nation, or they were in favor instead of remaining loyal to King George—in the hopes of KEEPING THE PEACE and avoiding a confrontation—nevertheless—divisions among their human families would quite naturally occur.

But please notice that Jesus does not say to any of his would-be followers that they should reject their parents and treat them disrespectfully and to stop loving them altogether! No, Jesus never said anything like this at all! But he was fully aware of the fact that those that his followers may have to reject their closest family ties—to remain connect to him!

You see, the very same God who said to the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai, “You shall have no other gods before me,” is the same God who is standing before those first century Hebrew people in Palestine—in the second Person of the Holy Trinity—Jesus Christ—true God begotten of the Father from eternity and also true Man born of the Virgin Mary! Therefore our Savior continues:

“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his own cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:34-39)!

But please notice, also together with me if you will, that the seemingly harsh words of Jesus in the first 6 verses of our Gospel lesson today...are immediately CONTRASTED by Jesus—**WITH HIS GOOD NEWS THAT THE SAME GOSPEL THAT CAN DIVIDE US, UNFORTUATENLY, FROM OTHER PEOPLE IN OUR HUMAN FAMILIES—CAN ALSO BIND US TOGETHER IN WITH ONE ANOTHER IN THE CHURCH—IN RELATIONSHIPS THAT CAN BE MUCH STRONGER FOR US THAN THOSE IN OUR NATURAL FAMILIES—OUR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN—AS THERAPISTS SOMETIMES CALL OUR BIOLOGICAL FAMILIES TODAY!**

Then Jesus goes on to tell us about the four links in the chain of salvation: **“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the One who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. And whoever gives one of the least of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (Matthew 10:40-42)!**

When Jesus was saying this, he was using a way of speaking which the Jewish people regularly used. The Jewish people always felt that to receive a person’s personal representative, their envoy or messenger, was the same as to receive the person himself. To pay respect to an ambassador was the same as to pay respect to the king who had sent him. To welcome with love the messenger of a friend was the same as to welcome the friend himself. The Jewish people always felt that to honor a person’s representative was the same as to honor the person whose representative he was. *What these words of Jesus offer to us therefore are the four links in the chain of salvation!*

- (1) The first link is that there is a God out of whose love the whole process of salvation began!*
- (2) The second link is that Jesus brought the very message of God’s salvation to sinful people.*
- (3) The third link is the human messenger or the prophet who would speak forth God’s Word to other human beings! In turn, therefore, they were passing on to others—the good news that they themselves, by the grace of God, have first of all received. And*
- (4) The fourth link in the chain of salvation—who in welcoming God’s messengers and believing the messages the messenger proclaims—discovers that he suddenly has this gift of new life within his soul.*

Of course, we cannot all be prophets that preach and proclaim the Word of God, but Jesus is saying that whoever gives God’s messengers the simple gift of hospitality will receive no less reward than the prophet himself. He or she also will become intimately acquainted with the God the messengers in their lives have come to proclaim!

Maybe today is a good day for us to remember—even throughout the history of our nation—that just as God has blessed our land with many people who have become great public figures—and with their being the very people whose voices have kindled the hearts of thousands of people—those very same people will tell you and me that they never could have done the great work for the cause of liberty and justice in our land—had it not been for the people in their own

homes—who provided them with the love and the care and the sympathy at times that they needed—who were never in the public eye at all!

When true greatness is one day measured up in the eyes of God, it will clearly be seen again and again that those persons who greatly moved the world were those persons who were themselves entirely dependent on other people who, as far as the world was concerned, remained totally unknown!

You know, brothers and sisters, if you and I were to sum up the call of Christ to every one of us in these last four verses of our Gospel lesson today (Mt. 10:40-42), we could probably do so with the one word “hospitality!” For after all, Jesus says, “The one who welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the One who sent me!”

Friends, what do you think of when you hear the word “hospitality”? Of course, the word “hospital” is included in the world hospitality. Do you think of a relative—a grandmother or an aunt, perhaps—who had the gift of hospitality? Who made everyone feel welcome in her home? Whose dinner table always had an extra place and who never let anyone leave the table without an extra helping of peach cobbler?

Hospitality is a very **important** and **yet a much overlooked theme in the Bible**, especially among us whose lives are all so busy even as the followers of Jesus Christ, still today. **God instructs Israel in no uncertain terms in Deuteronomy 10:19** to show hospitality to strangers: “*You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*” According to the Old Testament, hospitality is not optional. It’s a “mitzvah,” a commandment, and a true matter of justice.

The New Testament also places a premium on hospitality. When religious leaders accused Jesus of “welcoming sinners and eating with them” (Luke 15:2), they were saying that Jesus extended hospitality to the wrong kind of people. **When Paul criticized the Christians at Corinth for letting the poor go hungry when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper, he was accusing them of a breach of hospitality.** The author of **Hebrews** says that **hospitality is important because some have: “entertained angels without even knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).**

Just prior to today’s Gospel reading, Jesus sent out the Twelve to do the works they had seen him doing—to proclaim the nearness of God’s realm, heal the sick, and to cast out demons. He sent them out with only the essentials—no money, no bag, no change of clothes. **IN OTHER WORDS, THEY WERE ENTIRELY DEPENDENT ON HOSPITALITY.**

We need to hear the Bible’s message about hospitality because we live in a remarkably inhospitable world, a world that today is becoming ever more a world of gated communities and exclusive country clubs. **Harvard Sociologist Robert Putnam** sounded the alarm recently in his book entitled: **BOWLING ALONE. Putnam argues that since World War II, social engagement among Americans of all kinds has fallen off drastically.** We no longer join the **PTA** and the **Rotary** or **Kiwanis** service clubs. Church and synagogue attendance has fallen off. We entertain people in our homes less frequently. Instead we live in a way in which people are, to use **Putnam’s word, “cocooning”—staying at home, watching DVDs, and having pizza delivered to their door. In short, we live in a world that needs hospitality.**

WHAT WE OFTEN FORGET, EVEN AS CHRISTIANS, IS THAT HOSPITALITY HAS TWO VERY IMPORTANT DIMENSIONS.

First and foremost, the Bible commands hospitality because of the vulnerability of the stranger. In the ancient world, the stranger was just as vulnerable and marginalized as the widow or orphan. Indeed, when the Bible speaks of widows and orphans, it often speaks of the stranger, too. “*Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you*” (Ezekiel 22:7).

The second dimension of hospitality is how it affects those who show hospitality. The outrageous promise that Jesus makes to those who show hospitality is that if they open themselves to those who have no claim on their compassion and kindness, they will be opening themselves to God. “Whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me!”

And after all, who really needs hospitality? **Is it just the bag lady rooting through the trash dumpster behind the grocery store or restaurant? Or is it just the war veteran who stands at the end of the freeway off-ramp with his American flag and homemade sign?**

Of course they need our hospitality, but not nearly so much as every single one of us needs God’s hospitality. God shows us what hospitality is all about, by extending the circle of divine compassion to include the unlovely and unlovable, and by inviting every single one of us to down at the heavenly banquet.

I like the story about the **Methodist Bishop who had two mules: one was named—Willing** and the other was named **Able**. Willing was willing but wasn’t able. And Able was able but wasn’t willing. What God is looking for are people who are both willing and able?

And that’s why he gives his own Son into death on that old rugged cross so many years ago, to atone for our sins, something we were totally unable to do for ourselves; and to give us hearts that are willing---willing to show hospitality to one another and all other people still today in Jesus’ name. In doing so—we make greater room for God in our lives ourselves. Amen