

Sermon - Sunday 22nd June 2014

Matthew 10: 24-39

DO NOT BE AFRAID

This morning there are just two points I want to draw out from our Gospel reading.

- The first is that God is doing new things in the Church, just as he did new things two thousand years ago when Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee.
- Secondly, Jesus encouraged his disciples of long ago not to be afraid. I want to examine something of what that means for us today.

The context for the Gospel reading today is that Jesus was sending out his disciples two by two into the nearby towns and villages. He told them they were to give the message “The kingdom of heaven is near!” Then they were [merely!] to heal the sick, cast out demons and even to raise the dead. No wonder he needed to encourage them not to be afraid!

Sometimes it is difficult to translate what the disciples did two thousand years ago, into what would be appropriate for the 21st Century. But just last week I was encouraged by a fairly new initiative that has begun in Paisley.

I was over in Paisley for the week lecturing in a Discipleship Training School and heard about this initiative called CREATE. About five years ago, a group of young people from different churches in Paisley began a Friday night event where unchurched young people could come and hang out. They were given the opportunity to do something creative like singing, or playing in a band, or learning to play an instrument. Or going into an art room, and painting or doing other creative things. Or learning about film and video making.

There were non-alcoholic drinks available and places where they could just sit and hang out together. The evenings became so popular they had to rent bigger and bigger accommodation until finally about 700 – 800 young people were coming each month and the student union of the University of Western Scotland had to be hired.

Now CREATE has changed its shape somewhat. Instead of just one big venue once a month there are different venues each week where young people do different things. Up to 80 or 90 volunteers help to run the CREATE events.

The idea is to help the under-privileged youth of Paisley learn life-skills that can transform their lives. But more than just the skills they learn at CREATE they learn of the passionate love that God has for them, and instead of feeling hopeless, helpless with no self-worth, as they did when they first came to CREATE, they are changed into young people with purpose and self-confidence because of the foundation laid which is the unconditional love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Wade spoke to one of the young people who regularly goes to the CREATE events. After chatting for a while he asked her if she was a “Church person.” “Oh no,” she replied. “My parents forbid me to go to Church or to own a Bible. This is where I learn about God. These are my friends who know God.”

Two thousand years ago Jesus sent his disciples out two by two to take the message of the kingdom of heaven to the villages of Israel. In the 21st Century, modern-day disciples made friends with some of the young people of Paisley. By presenting the Gospel of the love of God, they are driving out the demons of despair, loneliness and lack of self-worth.

God is still very much at work today. Sometimes in the traditional Church we can despair because we don’t see young people in our midst. Our old ways of worship do not make it easy for young people to find God in the way we are accustomed to, but the Spirit of God works in new ways for new generations. We just might not recognize what God is doing.

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus said that the outworking of the message of the Gospel may bring division. Let us not allow the differences between the worship style of the younger generations to bring division. As we continue to work towards having a youth worker in Jedburgh, let us prepare for the possibility that they may use unconventional methods to draw young people to God. Let us rejoice that young people are coming to know God in whatever way God chooses to use.

My second point this morning is about overcoming fear. Jesus encouraged his disciples of long ago not to be afraid. He spoke these wonderful words that have echoed down through the centuries:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.

And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So **don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.**”

As I mentioned earlier these sayings of Jesus were in the context of the early disciples being trained to go and tell the new message of what Jesus was doing in the world. It was dangerous work for them. Their master was eventually crucified on the Cross for the work of kindness and compassion that he did. And they knew the same could happen to them. They desperately needed to be able to trust God and not be afraid.

We can take those words to challenge us today.

The key to not being afraid is the ability to trust God. God is able to help us deal with fear. Throughout life there are countless things that could cause us fear. The changing state of the world around us; rumours of wars, or actual wars breaking out; changes in our economic circumstances; changes in our health; worries about our children and grandchildren.

What God wants us to know is that he sees all those fearful things, and promises to be with us and to help us cope with each circumstance as it arises. God says, "I see when each little sparrow dies, and I care." He sees when we are very worried, and he cares. His Spirit will be with us to give us strength to cope with fear – if we open ourselves to the work of his spirit in our lives.

When Jesus said the very hairs of our heads are numbered, he meant that God knows us through and through – not just the outward number of the hairs of our heads, but the deep down things inside us that either cause us joy, or cause us to fear and be worried and anxious.

Not only does God know us and see into our innermost beings, but God says that we are valuable, and worth much more than many sparrows. This is the truth that we must allow deep into our beings - that we are truly valuable to God.

Not only valued by God, but we are deeply loved by God. Therefore we can trust that even though outward circumstances may get difficult and very challenging, God will be with us to comfort us and take away our fear.

God will give us many different ways of dealing with fear. As we are all different there will be different things that help different people.

One way that has helped me through the years may be of help to some of you too. When I first became a missionary, and worked for an organization that did not pay salaries, but expected each missionary to trust God for their daily provision, I became afraid of the future. A friend told me to read and memorize a verse from the book of Isaiah Chapter 12. That verse says, "I will trust and I will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation."

So when I was tempted to be afraid, I would say that verse over and over again, sometimes many times a day. "I will trust, and I will not be afraid for the Lord God is my strength and my song." As the truth of that verse went deep into my being and I really believed that The Lord God would be my strength, and therefore cause me to sing, I began to trust God. As I trusted God to be with me and to provide for me, my fear began to disappear. And God always looked after me.

So even today when a possible fear appears on my horizon, I have to consciously again trust God. To believe that I am more valuable than many sparrows, that he knows me through and through, and that he has the ability to take away my fear.

So the challenge to all of us today is to continue to grow in trust of the one who loves us more than any earthly parent possibly could. God is with us to take away our fear.

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