

This passage is one tough dog to get off the porch. Just kinda sits there, snarling at us with its teeth bared. We have to do a little coaxing to get at the joy. Without some words of encouragement, this passage might let us walk away thinking that Jesus is some kind of deceptive sword-wielding warrior-God. Or it might lead us to hear Jesus saying that we should be afraid of God, who “can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

We have to treat this threatening passage with care. Or else we might hear that, despite all his talk about always being with us, Jesus may still choose to deny us before God in heaven. Or we might come to think that Matthew’s Jesus has no real regard for loving our families, despite all his talk about loving our enemies and how loving without limits makes us like God.

Oh, there is some serious mischief available. But don’t let it distress you. For starters, this reading is a bit of a mutt. It sounds like a bunch of unrelated bits because whoever captured the oral tradition for Matthew’s community put together teachings and phrases from different sources and from different points in the Christ event. The Gospel author is up to something other than historical accuracy.

We do well to put this reading in the context of the sermon that Matthew’s Jesus gave on a hilltop overlooking the Sea of Galilee. The Sermon on the Mount is Matthew’s primary ethical teaching. And there at the heart of that sermon is this: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

So, Jesus is *not* revealing a sudden reversal in his purpose in the reading we just heard. We can be confident that Jesus is not calling for armed conflict in light of the beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Instead, the sword that Jesus brings is an inevitable consequence of disturbing human systems. The process of peacemaking is not predictably peaceful.

We often portray Christianity in terms of soldiers and battles (as we did in the hymn we just sang). Or at the very least, we present ourselves as *counter*-cultural. That worries me. It worries me because that portrayal can

so easily create divisions that carry and justify a certain sense of righteousness.

Still, we do offer the world something different, do we not?

We live in a culture that promotes scarcity fears. Or more accurately, we live in cultures – plural -- *cultures* of scarcity. Some of us live in scarcity at work, others at home or in the classroom. Some even live in a culture of scarcity at church.

Now, let me be very clear: I am not talking about people living in actual poverty; living without drinking water, medicine or food. I'm referring to those of us who have choices.

We convince ourselves that there's not enough time or money; not enough resources. We worry that what we do have is not quite enough or that we will lose it. So, we hoard, we overconsume and we expend more time, money and resources to protect our stuff. We fall into the habit of living in and emphasizing scarcity when, in fact, we have more than we really need.

Our fear of not *having* enough is often fed by the deeper fear that *we ourselves* are not enough. And that can lead us to point fingers and assign blame to others. We bully or we gossip to keep other people in line as though there was a limited amount of success or admiration available. Or we disengage entirely.

We do all this primarily to keep us from facing fears that *we* are not good enough or strong enough; not attractive enough, smart enough or safe enough. And that's how we feed cycles of scarcity. And the more we feed that cycle, the more it torments us. Eventually, we become the beasts that we dread most.

The good news is that there's a way out. Matthew's Jesus tells his followers that when they share and live out his teaching, people will react. Family-members will tell us we are naïve. Friends will be suspicious that we want something from them. Sometimes they even mean well, but other people will react with verbal or physical violence. We have to be very careful about approaching folks who feel trapped inside their own created scarcity.

A *little* discomfort is natural as people shift social patterns. But still greater division and discord seem to be inescapable for some of God's children. Promising peace and life in abundance can be dangerous, even

life-threatening, like it was for Matthew's first century Jewish-Christian community. And while most of us are not facing physical crucifixion, all of God's children who practice peace-making face *risk*.

That's partly because human *dominating* powers are rarely pleased to encounter God's *liberating* powers of holy peace. We can be tempted to imagine that the only risk involves standing up and speaking truth to power. I say "tempted" because while commitment to truth and justice is crucial, that commitment must come with a caution.

I have seen what happens when I make *my personal* truth the standard for justice. I have been bitten by dismissing people with contrary notions of truth and not acknowledging them *first* to be people. Listening to other perspectives doesn't require me to agree with every differing opinion I hear, but every time I deny the humanity of any other person, I commit an act of violence.

Last week, Leonard Pitts wrote an editorial about London imam Mohammed Mahmoud who saved the life of a terrorist who tried to kill Muslim worshippers outside a mosque. "Few things are more attractive," Pitts wrote, "than violence cloaked in righteousness." Our commitment to truth and justice is crucial, but our first commitment must be given *in humility* to God.

We *can* disrupt scarcity. Each of our lives intersects with cultures of scarcity. But we have to keep one thing in mind: Us *is* Them! We don't need to present Christianity as *anti-society* or *counter-cultural*. Whenever we create divisions that allow us to lose sight of each other's basic humanity or our own, we are choosing to swing that terrible sword that Jesus said would come along with the choice for peace.

Instead, we can invite people into practices that move us *all out* of human scarcity and *toward* God's abundance. We can offer a path that leads out of fearfulness into wholeness; into holiness. We will face resistance from the cultures of scarcity that we disturb, even though we are presenting a more life-affirming option.

People who are living with the illusion that there is not enough – not enough time or money or love – will resist our proposal that there is, in fact, plenty to go around. Enough to provide for us *and* for those who don't have a choice. People who have accepted that they *themselves* are not enough

– not powerful or perfect or clever enough – will resist our suggestion that, in God’s eyes, they are *more* than sufficient.

Matthew’s Jesus advises his followers to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves in going about their daily lives. To be innocent as doves involves cultivating our curiosity and compassion. Losing these starts as realism and ends in cynicism. Over-reliance on authoritative knowledge can slip into arrogance. And scarcity-thinking will begin to feed on what we rationalize as thick-skinned experience, leaving us with callousness.

To be wise as serpents is to keep before our eyes exactly who it is that can destroy our souls in the eternal punishment of hell. Be cautious, certainly, but don’t fear our fellow human beings. Be reverent and respectful, but not fearful of God, the source of all love, goodness, truth and beauty.

In Matthew’s Greek, Jesus warns us to “fear more *the one* who is able to destroy both soul and body.” That’s you and me – we are the ones who can choose to cloak our violence in righteousness. We are the ones who can choose to give up that which makes us most human and feed hatred in our own hearts.

As followers of Jesus, we should fear more the consequences of our own violent words and actions – not just because they can wound or kill, but because they destroy our deepest self that God created in God’s own image.

We have to be innocent and wise, *but we are never alone* as we go about our daily lives interacting with cultures that promote fear and insufficiency. Because whether anyone else can accept it or not, Jesus is with us all. We can speak the truth as we understand it, and we can advocate for mercy and justice as we perceive these. We can do so with innocent compassion and curiosity, and the wise awareness that we can pursue truth but never own it.

And that’s how we invite people into the abundance of God’s love. Through our words, our actions and the lives we live, soaked with wise and curious compassion, we can give out the promise of Christ: “Do not be afraid; God values each and every person as a child God, and cherishes us more than any of us can imagine.”

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