

Parallax

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 10:24-39

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On the second floor of the Pittsford Public library there is a row of tables and chairs against the Northeast facing wall. It is beyond the stacks and there is absolutely nothing of interest to library patrons there except those tables and chairs. That means the only people who find their way there are those who are seeking a quiet place to read or study or work. Even though the spot is usually quiet it has wall to wall windows overlooking the shops and restaurants and the tow path lining the canal. People are usually enjoying themselves there. So from the vantage of a comfortable chair in a quiet place I can be aware of the joy of people going about their lives, but not so aware as to be distracted by them. That's always been a very thoughtful space for me – when I sense that I'm *with* people, but also free to let my thoughts go where they need to. The tables along the northeast wall of the second floor of the Pittsford Library – it's a stimulating, comfortable, quiet, peaceful space. That's where I might go if I wanted to spend some time taking an in-depth look at the meaning of the gospel or some part thereof.

Where would you go? Maybe you'd join me at the library. I'd be glad for you to join me there, as long as you're quiet. Or maybe you have a favorite reading corner at home with a comfortable chair, an office at work that's quiet and conducive to concentration, or maybe you'd like to be outside on a bench under a shade tree. Learning, we know, is at its best when our temporal needs are met and we can be unrushed, calm, and at peace. So let me invite you to grab a snack and maybe a cup of coffee and go, at least mentally for the moment, to that comfortable place of study and reflection and let's spend some time reflecting on the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is revealed in the text we read this morning.

Within that loose collection of saying of Jesus we hear him say... "For I have come to set a man against his father." *Oh, well Happy Fathers' Day everybody!* It's a good thing we've settled in to such comfortable, peaceful places, there may be a substantial work of interpretation ahead of us. We know that Jesus is a man of peace and love, so clearly a surface reading here isn't going to give us a view of the gospel as it is unfolding around us. We're going to have to maybe parse out the cultural understanding of what "set a man against his father," or "a daughter against a mother," or "whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" really means. From our vantage so far, Jesus comes off as quite harsh and sort of mean. He seems to be calling for disunity and even disrespect. That's not the peaceful, restorative Jesus we know from the rest of the gospel narrative. Maybe a bit more of the text will help set his words in a more gracious light: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

That's just disturbing. These words of Jesus just seem so antithetical to who we know him to be and to what we know he stands for. This is after all the guy we sometimes call the Prince of Peace. He's the one who a few chapters after this reading will tell one of his disciples *not* to draw his sword when a group of people come to carry out an unjust warrant for his arrest with clubs and swords of their own. The story of Jesus's life and death is one of a man giving over his life to violence without committing violence as part of a work of

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

redemptive peace. How can that same man say that he's come to bring violence and chaos and enmity between those who ought to love one another!?

That's a question that people who consider the Bible to have an important, illuminating and instructive role in their lives have asked for a long time. Some have even focused so much on this one text to the detriment of others that they've decided Jesus not only condones violence, but condones it as a legitimate exercise in bringing about the gospel.

I would really like to point out to those who have so interpreted this text that they've got the Greek word for "sword" wrong and that Jesus has actually called for the wielding of puppies and kittens, but the word really is sword. I would really like to be able to tell those who proof text their arming themselves to the teeth using this one passage that its historical context or its context within the gospel narrative or some other esoteric quality of the text means that it doesn't say what it seems to say, that Jesus isn't describing actual animosity between people who should love one another or the use of weapons against a world that seems inhospitable. The problem is I've exhausted all textual options and I've got nothing to say about how the text doesn't say what it says. It does. I've been here figuratively in this comfortable place for days trying to figure out how this text lines up with the rest of the gospel I've come to know. I've looked up words and read history and theology and still Jesus's words cut like a sword right through the peacefulness and calm of the reflective space I'm in. And that's the thing.

That's the one thing I haven't yet changed – my location.

Do you know what "parallax" is? That's a word used in science, in art, in technology. It describes the notion that things look different from different positions. Have you ever been driving down the road when the person in the passenger seat says, "Why are you going so slow," and you look at the speedometer and you're doing exactly the speed limit or maybe a bit more? That's one way to see family members set against one another, but it's also an example of parallax. Because the passenger of the car is off to the side of the speedometer the relative position of the needle appears to hover over a different number than from the vantage of the driver. That's parallax. Here's an example of parallax in art.

{ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiYMol0VjWo>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BorcaCtjmog&t=10s> }

Depending on where you stand, you see something different. The same is true when reflecting on the nature of the gospel and I confess, I've set us up to see exactly how that works. I asked you to do what we often do when we study the Bible. I asked you to find a comfortable, soothing and calm vantage from which to look upon the text, but that isn't always – in fact it may seldom be – that that is the best vantage to see the true shape of the gospel of Christ.

So let's change where we're standing. Come with me now to a very different place than the quiet comfortable library, come with me to the streets. The murder of George Floyd has, as you know, created a tipping point in a struggle for justice that has been going on for generations. First in Minneapolis, then in cities around the country, and now around the world people have taken to the streets in protest against some very specific forms of institutionalized racism. I attended one such protest here in Rochester. It was never physically violent and as such is described as "peaceful," but the air in the streets of Rochester that day *was* full of anger. People willingly chose to stand in together in the middle of major intersections for long periods of time as thousands of people made their way through the city. Motorists who hadn't planned on such a delay were often angry that they couldn't get where they were supposed to go. On several occasions I heard very angry, very loud displays of animosity – and not just on the part of onlookers. Make no mistake, the protestors, myself included, were and are angry. Angry enough to shout, angry enough to march, angry enough to cause enough chaos to force the city to listen to the voices that have been systematically silenced for hundreds of years. Though the organizers of that protest were committed to non-violence, they also asked that people less likely to be singled out for violence, namely, we White people, walk on the outside of the group and allow those more likely to be the recipients of violence – to walk on the inside. There was no intent to cause violence, but there

was a preparation and a willingness to endure it. I even got the sense that if violence had come that day, some – not all, but some – of the people in the crowd would have been prepared to fight back.

I was never particularly afraid for my physical wellbeing or that of anyone else there, but the air was thick with tension and anxiety and anger and danger and even though it never manifested itself it felt that violence wasn't very far away. But there was something else there that day too. Joy. Gladness. Even a cautious sense of hope. Much more meaningful change than has been materialized as of yet will be necessary to stem the tide, but there was in that crowd that day an articulated and felt sense that this could be the precursor to something more meaningful.

What if that's a better place to stand when looking at the gospel than a comfortable place to sit? It does make the text sound different. When I'm surrounded by nothing more than my own privilege and comfort I hear the words of Jesus and they seem disjointed. They sound like Jesus is *prescribing* violence and animosity, because there is none there already. But when you stand in the midst of chaos, the threat of violence, and animosity – a place I haven't had to occupy much in my life, but others have occupied all the days of their lives – the words of Jesus don't seem to be *prescribing* they seem to be *describing* a reality that already exists.

You see, it has never happened that marginalized persons have come asking for their worth to be recognized and their rights to be heeded and the society around them said simply and sweetly, "Oh, you're right, here is equity." No, in every instance calls for justice have been met with fierce, angry, chaotic, violent, defensive resistance. It has happened so many times that it seems to be a fact of life. If we credit Jesus with knowing that we can understand that the violence he is willing to bring isn't his own violence, it's that of the systems that will violently push back against him. It isn't his own animosity for family he's talking about, it's the fact that societies, and communities, and yes families will inevitably react against their own, but Jesus isn't willing to let animosity and chaos stand in the way of justice, peace, and hope. If being put down by the people who are supposed to love him is the price of standing for equity, so be it. If suffering violence at the hands of the keepers of the status quo is the result of his fighting for the marginalized, so be it.

Now we're beginning to see the shape of the gospel. The gospel isn't the violence and chaos, it's that anger and animosity and violence won't keep God away, indeed they beckon for God's presence and God answers in the person of Jesus who willingly bore violence in his own body in pursuit of the worth of those deemed worthless by the world.

So you see, if you want to see the true shape of the gospel you might not start by finding a comfortable place to sit; you might start by finding a scary place to stand.

Amen.