

Sermon Text – Sunday, June 21, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Genesis 2:8-21; 2nd Reading: Romans 6:1-11

Scripture: Matthew 10:24-39 “Trustworthiness”

There is a lot in this scripture worth exploring but one thing that stands out is Jesus telling his followers to have no fear and finishing with “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” I think that taking up “the cross” in that culture would be a fearful thing, their cross was a sign of oppression and death. Let me share this poem by Amos R. Wells that speaks to what Jesus is asking here.

God laid upon my back a grievous load,
a heavy Cross to bear along the road.
I staggered on, and lo! one weary day,
an angry lion sprang across my way.
I prayed to God, and swift at his command,
the Cross became a weapon in my hand.
It slew my raging enemy and then became
a Cross upon my back again.
I reached a desert.
O'er the burning track I persevered –
the Cross upon my back.
No shade was there, and in the cruel sun.
I sank at last, and thought my day was done.
But lo! The Lord works many a blest surprise,
the Cross became a tree before my very eyes!
I slept – I woke – to feel the strength of ten,
I found the Cross upon my back again.
And so, through all my days from then to this,
the Cross – my burden – has become my bliss.
Nor ever shall I lay burden down.
For God, some day will make my Cross a Crown.

Do not fear the cross Jesus asks us to carry, or the criticism and maliciousness that come to us as we group together as Jesus' disciples. Remember though that Jesus is not cautioning his disciples or us about taking up personal “crosses” of victimization, oppression, or self-loss; Jesus is cautioning his disciples that they will carry the same cross he himself will carry, “A disciple is not above the teacher.” The author of this poem knew that with God's strength we can overcome the burdens that come to us in life, with the advocate beside us the burden of the cross will become blessings.

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This scripture from Matthew's gospel is a continuation of Jesus' instructions to his disciples as he sends them out to be "laborers for the harvest." We can go back a few paragraphs and read that the Pharisees claimed Jesus "drives out demons by the Prince of demons" which is probably what prompts Jesus to tell his disciples, "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!" So, have no fear of them, do not fear what they can do to you. He reminds his followers that if God cares that much for the outcast, for the sparrows and the hairs of your head – how much more will he care for you who are of more value than many sparrows.

The other scripture readings this morning illustrate our value as God's creation. From Paul's letter to the Romans is the promise of "newness of life" as we unite with Christ through baptism which is symbolic of his death, burial, and resurrection. Therefore, we believe that we have value because we consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. In the Genesis story of Abraham, Isaac, and Ismael – we see Hagar crying out to God in despair for being sent to wander in the wilderness, fearful that her son may die. God hears her and the boy's cries and God answers. God was with the boy as he grew up, even though Abraham's family cast him aside. This is what God has promised and God is trustworthy.

If God promises this newness of life even to those who are cast aside by their family, we can know that he will be with us, defending us in all the circumstances of our lives. Even the Psalmists recognize God's trustworthy provision of care and deliverance, "You, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you." Even today, with our songs of praise and in our worship, we acknowledge that God is trustworthy, great, and faithful to redeem.

But guess what, while that is true, we will still face hardship, there will be those who try to "kill the body." There will be people and groups of people who gossip and "judge" Christians and church goers. Jesus recognizes this in his instructions to his disciples – have no fear of them. He gives them a warning "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Jesus tells them that, one's foes will be members of one's own household and all that is because they follow Jesus. Maybe that is why he closes these instructions with "take up the cross and follow me . . . those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

In his instructions to the disciples, given before he sends them to take up his cross and do the work he started, Jesus wants them to realize that the work is not going to be what brings them glory. Glory comes to them even as they

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acknowledge Jesus and God in the work. “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven.” Giving credit to the one who sends them to accomplish the task is what brings glory. Acknowledging that the work Jesus sends them to do cannot be done without the “authority” Jesus gives them and the strength that only comes through God the Father, which is what brings glory to the laborers. Remember last week we received the message, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” This was an important message to the disciples as they were sent to deliver God’s message to God’s people.

Jesus words are ominous – “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” I am sure that these words were just as hard for Matthew’s congregation to hear as they are for us. We pray for peace, but following Jesus brings swords. We struggle for unity, but following Jesus means families will be split apart. Jesus’ message is that doing God’s work in the world is challenging work, but “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Hearing that, how do we stay committed to God’s work. I wonder if unbelievers would think all of this is foolishness.

The message I get from Jesus words is “have no fear” because God is with us no matter what and that should encourage us to stay committed to our mission in the face of fear. God is trustworthy, steadfast, and faithful. Jesus reminds us not to be afraid of what can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Our fear of things in this world is misplaced; we should, however, fear God alone who can destroy both soul and body. Fear God because without God we would have no life.

There is an underlying message in this that we can be bold in the face of fear. Trusting God frees us to respond to our struggles in faith. No matter what God is with us, and God knows our worth. “There is contrast between what we can see (suffering and fear) and what God sees in us (worthiness, faithfulness).”¹ Notice that Jesus assures his disciples of their worthiness before he gives them warnings about the conflict they will face in the world.

We live in a world full of chaos and conflict and that affects us. Conflict shows up in our economy, our families, and in our churches – fear not. We want the world to be otherwise, and it is in our nature to lament. We can lament over the hard truths of life and discipleship. Just because we are followers of Christ does not mean we will experience a life free from strife and full of blessings.

¹ Sonia E. Waters. “Matthew 10:24-39 – Connecting the Reading with Scripture” *Connections, Year A, Vol 3*. Eds. Green, et.al. WJK. 2019. Print. pp. 98-100

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That's a lie – Jesus is more important than comfort. The truth is that Christian living will be like the life Jesus himself lived. He was falsely accused, persecuted, run out of town, questioned by authorities, and even compared to the Prince of Demons. The disciple is not above the teacher. Jesus was criticized and maligned, his followers are criticized and maligned. In our Old Testament readings Jeremiah and the Psalmist lament the insults and “violence” they endure yet in that lament they continue to praise the steadfast love of God.

Church, God is trustworthy, steadfast, and faithful. That we can count on, but the call to “fear not” means that we must trust God enough to do the brave and faithful thing. The reassurance of God’s trustworthiness does not suddenly make the world a better place – we know however that we can step out and do the work Jesus sends us out to do without fear that the floor will fall out beneath our feet. But, if it does, just like God cares for the sparrow we will never fall beyond God's love and care.

The message in our scriptures over the last couple of weeks is that there is work to be done and God will be with us in that work. Church, we must be about God's work! May it be so.