

“How Did That Get in the Bible?”
a sermon by Rev Sue Strachan based on Matthew 10:24-39
Wolcott Congregational Church
June 25, 2017

According to last week’s scripture lesson we as Christ’s disciples, are commissioned to do the work of Jesus in the world: to cure the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. I hope I made it clear that those things are do-able and not only that, so many of you have been hard at working doing them already. As surprising as that to do list might have been, the verses just read are filled with ideas that have caused more than one person to wonder, “Where did that come from? How did that get in the Bible?” for they seem contrary to what we have been taught about the love of Jesus and his Way. I once had the Bible explained to me this way. “The Bible does not always say what it means; and the Bible does not always mean what it says; but it does always mean what it means.” That’s what we are searching for today, meaning. And the question we are trying to answer, or the answer we are trying to find is “What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?” Today’s lesson also reminds us that there is a cost of discipleship and that it is worth everything.

The word disciple means follower, but we are to be followers with a purpose, to learn from the one we are following, as the scripture says, “to be like the teacher, like the Master.” To be a disciple requires discipline which requires a decision to act, the will to practice, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to follow fully. Once we are like the teacher, identified fully with the Master then we may also find ourselves under attack. That’s why when Matthew writes that if the master (Jesus) is being accused of being Beelzebul, Prince of the Demons, the disciples can be certain they will be included in the accusation. It is part of the risk of being a disciple. Jesus was falsely given the title ‘Prince of the Demons’ as a way of getting rid of him. It didn’t work. In the next lines, Jesus tells us, “Do not be afraid of them (meaning those who make false accusations like that). What is covered up will be uncovered, secrets will become known.” The teachings of Jesus are like light that shines in the darkness and his light cannot be overcome. Jesus says, “Do not be afraid to shout the Good News from the housetops. Do not fear those who can kill the body, but rather fear the One who can destroy both the body and the soul.” In Hebrew theology, the soul is who we are, our unique selves, the real “Sue Strachan” resides in the soul that God created, not in this vulnerable and frail body which will not survive in its current form. The One whom we should fear and therefore be obedient to, is the One who made us, the One who knows the number of hairs on our heads; the One who places great value on the tiniest of sparrows and even greater value on each one of us here. “So,” Jesus says, “do not be afraid.” We are not to be afraid of God, while remembering that God is the only one to be afraid of, the only One capable of our ultimate ending. Don’t give power to some false god who preys on fears; and never, never forget who truly knows us, each of us by name and by deed; and chooses to love us anyway.

Jesus says, “Do not think that I came to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” What? How did that get in the Bible? Did the Christmas angels get it wrong? You know, “Peace on Earth, Goodwill,” Maybe, we could hope, Jesus didn’t mean what he said, and what he said isn’t what he meant, but then what in the world? Jesus told us that the peace of Christ is not as the world gives. It is not an absence of conflict, confrontation, or a maintenance of the status quo. And, it is not other worldly. We disciples must not only remain in the world, but also be part of its transformation into God’s Kingdom. Transformation means change. In case you never heard it before, most people do not like change and they especially do not like change if it directly affects their life style choices, rituals and long-held traditions. Add a change in how to think about or how to

approach God and we have the ultimate circumstance for war within ourselves, our families, our neighbors, and even within and between nations. Yet we, as disciples, have to trust in what Jesus has asked us to do. We have to stay strong in our faith and rely on Jesus, on God. According to our lesson today, if we claim Jesus only in church on Sundays and then disclaim his Way in our everyday lives out there in the world, Jesus is unable to claim us, to speak for us when it really counts. Christ's Word is a transforming Word and we must stay open to the changes that love and forgiveness bring. We know the changes we need in our world, our society, our nation, our homes; and we have all too many fears and excuses for not (as Gandhi put it) 'being the change we would wish in the world' and for not doing what God has asked and equipped us to do. Interestingly, one of the ancient symbols for the Word of God found in the Bible is a two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of God. God's Word cuts both ways and cuts us to the quick, getting to the heart, hoping to get to the soul itself.

Jesus was a radical in the truest sense of the word which means "at the root." His Way, his life, his death all point to the same thing and one thing only - life. Life came into being through God and life continues only through God. God is our Rock, our Foundation, our Hiding Place and our Resting Place, our Comfort, our Guide, our Salvation, our Peace. Nothing else and no one else can suffice; not our families, our best friends, our work, our knowledge, our faith practices, our alliances and reliance's. Only God. God's love for us is total and our love for God must be also if we are to gain the full benefit of God's free, but costly grace. God has chosen us, claimed us, and called us by name. When you were baptized you were given the family name of Christian and when you were confirmed you accepted Jesus as your Savior and therefore your brother. Family first is how most of us live. Jesus wants us to understand and to acknowledge that we are members of the family of God first. It is only by serving God first that we can fully serve anyone else; by loving God first that we can fully love anyone else. Why is it so hard to trust that our spouses, children, friends, co-workers will learn to understand when we say "no" to them and "yes" to God? If our relationships with one another prevent us from having a full relationship with God and with Jesus who gave his life for us, which commitment do you think is headed in the wrong direction? Which relationship holds all of life's possibilities and the changes needed in our world and in our daily living?

According to Jesus, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind is the first and greatest commandment." The second one, is "Love your neighbor as yourself." God must come first! Why? Because God said so? No, rather because God first loved us; because God is Love; because we wouldn't have a clue about what it means to be truly loved if we did not have a loving God who created us, who knows our every need, who counts the hairs on our heads. Our God gave his only son for us who suffered death on a cross and showed the world the fulfilled promise of resurrected and eternal life. Jesus says, "Love me more, love me first, take up the cross, follow me." According to Jesus, no one and nothing else can give you life, not even the love of your life, your spouse, children, parent, faithful pet, favorite place, favorite game, favored pastime. All of these relationships are temporary and because they are we will know loss and sometimes even feel that we have lost all that made life worth the living. But, here's the thing, love God first and God's love will be there at the last, and you will find that life is not lost after all, but rather is found in God and that our Christian hope is true. We will all be united again in God. What does it mean to be a disciple? It means what it means. Love God, follow Jesus, and let the Holy Spirit work through you without counting the cost. Amen.