



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 7A, JUNE 25, 2023
JEREMIAH 20:7-13; PSALM 8:11,18-20; ROMANS 6:1b-11; MATTHEW 10:24-39

PERILOUS POLITICS OF OTHERING



Matthew 10:24-39 [*Jesus said to the twelve disciples, “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. 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; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves*

father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”]

This is a decidedly difficult gospel appointed for today. In the first part, Jesus is telling his followers you will surely be persecuted if you espouse this way of life. Even your family members may turn on you, but remain steady. Keep the faith. Trust in God.

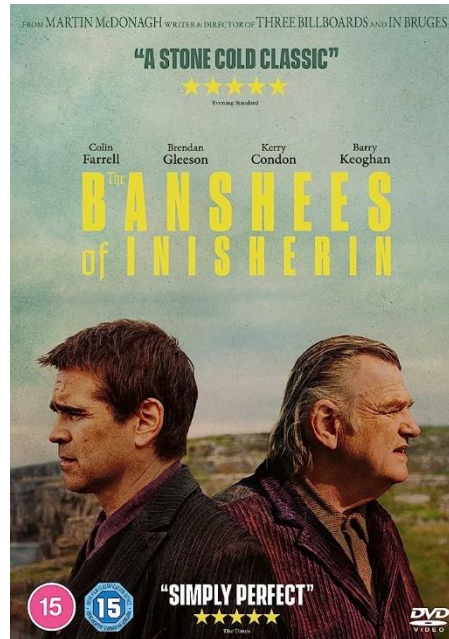
The second part really stops us short though, with talk of a sword to cleave us from family members. It is prophetic language, harking back to a time when Israelites turned on one another, and families were torn apart. Matthew’s gospel can be a bit hyperbolic in its rhetorical style, but perhaps we can still angle in as we seek understanding and inspiration in our own lives today. What is Jesus saying to you and me now?

For that, let’s use a modern parable, a film actually, a work of fiction which speaks truth alongside the realities of life. I first watched *The Banshees of Inisherin* last spring, when it was abuzz on the awards scene. While I found the film quaint, witty, raw, and exquisitely beautiful, I did not “get” the movie or its meaning.

Set in 1923 on a remote island off the coast of western Ireland, we watch as two longtime friends, Padraic and Colm, destroy their bonds of affection for one another for the most inane of reasons. On not much more than a whim they jettison their brotherhood and turn self-destructive and mutually destructive. Padraig’s sister is the only sensible one who sees the fight for what it is—tragic violence with no redeeming value.

I will stop there in sharing details, because the film is well worth watching.

Kathy and I watched it a second time last week, on the flight home from Ireland, having spent time on Inis Mor, the beautiful island off Ireland’s west coast where the movie was filmed. We wanted to see the landmarks and vistas we had just visited, but we had also fortuitously gained a sense of the ways that Ireland’s civil war still weighs on the psyche of its soul a century later. The movie as parable only makes sense against the backdrop of the Irish Civil War.



In the 1920s, Irish friends and family members turned on one another in a bloody fight over whether one supported the peace treaty with Britain, or not. One day, brothers were drinking their pints in pubs together; the next day they were killing one another—all because the political “powers that be” convinced them, literally overnight, that those who stood on the other side of a contrived line of treaty allegiance were now worth killing.

To be sure, the treaty and all that has flowed from it in Ireland’s (and Northern Ireland’s) troubled history since is complicated, but Padraic and Colm and their tragic strife are commentary on how we can so easily justify violence, drawing lines of Otherness that lose sight of our common humanity.

I fear this is what our country is doing in our time, when tribal affiliations derive from a political and social landscape so hyperpolarized, that we are teetering on a fulcrum of civil war, a wholly unnecessary and tragic civil war, if we do not find another way. If that seems to you to be hyperbolic rhetoric, then choose another tack, but beware of the rhetoric of “otherness,” which is fuel for the fire of violence. And it cuts both ways.

It may appear on the surface that Jesus is saying don’t be too attached to your family members, for some will turn on you if you follow the ways of Jesus. At one level, that is true, but a deeper probing might suggest a more nuanced message.

When Jesus says “whoever loves father or mother more than me...,” the Greek word for *love* here is *phileo*, which is curious because Matthew only uses that word for love in three other places, all in pejorative and admonishing ways: do not be like the hypocrite who *loves* to pray in public, putting on airs; do not be like the one who *loves* to sit in the best seat at the feast rather than taking the lower seat; and when Judas tells the guards in Gethsemane that the one he kisses (literally the one he loves, *phileo*) is the one to be arrested.ⁱⁱ Each of these bear some status-seeking, some self-importance, some ego need, dependent on the other’s attention, or what C.S. Lewis called “need-love.”ⁱⁱⁱ It is self-serving, consumptive even, and it is inevitably destructive. We all have it within us to nourish the sort of consumptive love.

And Jesus comes with his sword, not of violence, but as a severing tool to cut the chords of the false self’s need-love, in order to be released into the freedom of following Christ where losing one’s life is the path to finding it.

The invitation is for us to look across the landscape of our lives and see where we have perhaps set up family, or any of the “good things in life,” within a paradigm of phileo, or need-love, or a hyper-emphasized sense of importance that blinds us to the sort of love that God has for us and yearns for us to have for one another. A liberating and life-giving love which is freely given, unconstrained and unconstraining.

The truth is God has this sort of love for every human being, and expects us to as well, a profligate love that is antidote for our predispositions toward the politics of divisive othering. It won't inoculate against another's turn to violence, but we have a choice in how we respond.

Jesus doesn't let us off easy. This is the harder road, to be sure, but I am convinced the world needs this message of real love, true love, now as much as ever.

It is our story to tell, as followers of Christ. It is our story to live, if we are willing.

The final scene of the film has embittered friends turned enemies, Padraic and Colm, on the beach at sunrise. They refuse to release their enmity, but they cannot help themselves from each offering a tender gesture of concern for the other's well-being.

There is, in the moment, a simultaneous sense of tragedy and hope, which seems a fitting if unsatisfactory ending to the parable, inviting us to pick it up and make it our own.

What will we do from there?

ⁱ <https://museeholocauste.ca/en/resources-training/the-process-of-othering/>

ⁱⁱ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/06/a-difficult-text-for-difficult-crises.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Read C.S. Lewis' *The Four Loves*. A brief summary is at <https://tafacorianthoughts.com/2022/04/29/the-four-loves-by-c-s-lewis-introduction/>