

**Behind Closed Doors**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
June 25, 2017

**Scriptures:**

**Matthew 10:24-39 (NRSV)**

<sup>24</sup>A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; <sup>25</sup>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!

*Whom to Fear*

<sup>26</sup>So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>27</sup>What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. <sup>28</sup>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. <sup>29</sup>Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup>And even the hairs of your head are all counted. <sup>31</sup>So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

<sup>32</sup>Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; <sup>33</sup>but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

*Not Peace, but a Sword*

<sup>34</sup>Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

<sup>35</sup> 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;

<sup>36</sup> and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

<sup>37</sup>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; <sup>38</sup>and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup>Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

**Introduction and Opening Comments:**

An elderly lady calls her neighbor and says, "Please come over and help me. I have a very difficult jigsaw puzzle, and I can't figure out how to get started."

Her neighbor asks, "What is it supposed to be when it's finished?"

The lady says, "According to the picture on the box, it's a rooster."

Her neighbor decides to go over and help her with the puzzle. When he arrives, his elderly friend showed him the puzzle spread out all over the table. He studies the pieces for a moment, then looks at the box, and turns to her and says:

"First, no matter what we do, we're not going to be able to assemble these pieces into anything resembling a rooster." Then he takes her hand and says, "Secondly, I want you to relax. Let's have a nice cup of tea," and then he says with a deep sigh, "Let's put all the Corn Flakes back in the box."



### **Sermon:**

By the time, Matthew wrote his Gospel, somewhere in Syria around 85 C.E., Jewish and pagan God-fearers, who confessed Jesus as the Christ, have formed their own synagogues or ecclesias. We translate ecclesia as church although ecclesia meant a gathering, people called out for a purpose such as worship, teaching, socializing, and mutual support. Social support would have been critically important for those Christ-confessors, Jew or pagan, who may have become alienated from family and friends because of their confession.

Therefore, we must hear our scriptures this morning as being all about Matthew's community of faith, its inner workings, its imperatives, and hopes over and against other synagogues or gatherings that do not believe in or confess Jesus as the Christ. If we don't keep this context in mind, we run the risk of misconstruing Matthew's instruction manual for his Jesus-followers and his community of faith just as the lady did with her crossword puzzle and its box.

Matthew and his church understood that there must be a time for evangelizing, primarily fellow Israelites, living among the nations before Jesus would return to claim or collect his own and usher in the kingdom of God. Jesus indicated as does Matthew for his church that this is not going to be an easy undertaking.

Jesus' disciples should not have expected to be treated any better than he was. If the powers that be, accused and persecuted Jesus as being in league with or possessed by Beelzebul, the Arch Demon, then his disciples could expect the same or worse deviance labeling with all its associated repercussions in their relationships with family, friends, and the religious-political establishment.

In addition, the disciples should not have been overly concerned or in fear of their community and synagogue leaders because all they could do was disavow, excommunicate, flog, or kill them. What the disciple should be concerned about was how God saw them because God has the power to cut them off from the kingdom of God for all eternity. Furthermore, if God is aware of the sacrificial death of the smallest and most common of birds, how much more so is God aware of the plight of the disciple?

Also, in the ancient, Mediterranean peasant's life there was almost no privacy. As soon as everyone awoke, usually at the crack of dawn to work in the cool of the day, the doors of a house were opened and remained open, as a rule, until bedtime or during periods of inclement weather. Any attempt to do things privately, i.e., behind closed doors, caused people to become suspicious of

the occupants, and suspicion was the batter in which gossip and speculation arose.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Jesus was telling his disciples they were not to keep his teachings behind closed doors; that is, don't keep them private or exclusive, because in the final analysis, the truth of all that Jesus taught would be revealed on the day the kingdom arrives, and all those who taught contrary or attempted to thwart him and his teachings will be shamed and cut off. In other words, disciples don't be like the Pharisees, who did their teachings in exclusive gatherings behind the closed doors of their synagogues or ecclesias.

God knows and cares about Jesus' disciples; however, God cannot take away other people's right or power to harm them and still maintain humankind's divine right of self-determination. However, what God can and will do is guide, strengthen and comfort the disciples in what lies ahead. In this context, Jesus told his disciples to trust in him and his teachings. If the disciple acknowledged Jesus before the world, i.e. other Jews, then he would acknowledge the disciples before his heavenly Father come the day of reckoning and inauguration of the kingdom on earth. Deny Jesus and he will have no choice but to deny those of Israel, who deny him.

In the Mediterranean societies of antiquity, one's family of origin was owed paramount loyalty and total attachment. Kinship was the overriding social institution, holding precedence and primacy in the lives of all the persons Jesus dealt with. Persons transferring their loyalty to some surrogate family, as the disciples of Jesus were asked to do in Matthew, would find that their family of origin and its associated social network would turn against them. Social solidarity within the all-important networks and the honor of the family of origin would have demanded they do so.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, standing up for Jesus and giving testimony to his message and witness would cost his followers. Jesus expanded this insight by saying that the disciple must not think that he has come to usher in some sweet, religious utopia - no, not at all. People being what they are, a disciple of Jesus could expect the worse. What we hear in today's scriptures is nothing more than the natural outcome of Jesus' teachings confronting the most basic level of his society - the family.

Jesus, capitalizing upon the sages' teachings that a person must honor God and the law more than his teacher, and his teacher more than his father (Baba Mezia 2:11), pitted family member against family member, in-group members against in-group members not because Jesus had some sinister plan, but because Jesus knew, as Matthew's community had proven, that his message would upset the old schemas of family life and the social order. In a world where the extended family was the primary economic, religious, educational, and social network, to experience dis-attachment from family was about as serious as it got, it was tantamount to a sentence in hell.

Now in summation, imagine what following Jesus had done to some in Matthew's congregation. Family ties, the context of one's self-identity and worth had been severed. Some in Matthew's church may have lost employment and means of livelihood. Some had become as dead to their families. Others in Matthew's church may have gone through the humiliation of a public flogging at the direction of the synagogue's "hazzan" or overseer. (The Apostle Paul endured several of these floggings) People faced all these possibilities armed only with the teachings and promises of Jesus, whose teachings had gotten him crucified as a criminal, buried, and some said resurrected fifty-odd years earlier; not to mention, the fragile security of their new surrogate family, the Church, whose future was also uncertain

Wow! You've got to feel this. This is really, really, scary stuff. How do you know Jesus' teachings and his promise to return are true and, furthermore, you may have to die to prove it all

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Malina; Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Kindle Locations 1415-1419). Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

or die before it's proven? It may have worked for Jesus, but you are not Jesus. How do you know faith in Jesus' way is the right way because what he taught often seems contrary to centuries of your religious traditions? What are the possible costs to you, not only in this life but beyond, if he was wrong?

Today - some two-thousand years after Matthew's writing - Christians in this country are not faced with persecutions, although it seems more often these days we do experience ridicule and criticism for our faith among certain segments of our society. However, these people don't bother me. I say this because they tend to be pseudo-intellectuals exposing their ignorance of Christianity, attention seekers, or simply self-aggrandizing sycophants.

In this nation, we are free to practice our religion within the limits of the law and are encouraged to be religious by some aspects of our society. In general, our Christian moral values and ethics help to maintain and support the underpinnings of our free-market capitalism, the democratic processes, and rule of law.

However, I must also add that our culture today sends subtle and not so subtle messages that we are to keep our religion within certain boundaries. That is, just enough religion to legitimate and protect our economic and political processes, our social and civil freedoms, and provide us with existential comfort in the face of death but not enough to truly transform the human heart and this nation, according to the ways of God. In short, keep your religion behind closed doors; keep the imperatives of your faith exclusive to yourself and your groups or denominations.

Much of our culturally, co-opted Christianity often begs the question as to whether western Christianity has become so watered down that it is no longer true to the message of Christ. Has God's revealed will been distorted to harmonize with prevailing economic and political forces and philosophies that drive our culture at the expense of the gospel's life-giving power for all people, creatures, and creation just as it had been in ancient Israel's compromises with Rome in Jesus' day?

In addition, has the gospel's world transforming power taken a backseat to a single-minded gospel of personal salvation - itself a product of Seventeenth Century European Enlightenment? The gospel, in truth, does address our deepest fears and anxieties about death; however, it must never do so at the expense of responding to God's mandate for life. Some may think I am making too fine a point of the matter, but I don't think so.

The gospel's promise of eternal life in the kingdom of God is a benefit of discipleship for sure, but I don't think that is the gospel's primary purpose. In Matthew, Jesus' states that his purpose is to call Israel to a renewal of faith that would prompt God to usher in a new world order ruled by the politics of compassion, morality, ethicalness, and justice. However, Judaism having failed that, the Kingdom is now believed to come through the efforts of non-Jewish, Christ-confessing followers or disciples of all nations. To this I add that with the kingdom's delay and what appears as the daunting mission of transforming the world, people have devolved into the least important aspect of Jesus teachings - personal salvation in death at the expense of world transformation.

Dear friends, the gospel is all about the living and life, not death. To see it otherwise is to be sorely misinformed, ignorant of scriptures, or at worst victims of opportunistic prophets, who seek status among others and possibly revenue. People who proclaim the gospel as being all about personal salvation in death miss the point of scripture because in the final analysis such a message reveals itself to be nothing but naked, self-interest and psychological comfort at the expense of a Greater Good - bringing God's rule and reign on earth for the benefit of all life and creation.

However, I must admit that the gospel of personal salvation in death is low-cost, safe, and non-threatening to the powers of this world - opiate of the masses as it were, whose anesthetic fog benefits the cultural and economic structures of the status quo. I speak of powers that would enslave the human heart, mind, and soul using whatever means available, but especially cheap,

self-centered, and self-aggrandizing religion. I think Benjamin Franklin captured what I am trying to say, when he said "serving God is doing good to man, but praying is thought an easier service and therefore is more generally chosen."

People who pursue this gospel of personal salvation at the expense of the greater purposes of the Good News commit one of humankind's greatest if not only sin - the reversal of means and ends. For Jesus, the end was the kingdom of God come on earth and the means to that end was self-expending and self-sacrificing love for God and others. Therefore, the focus of one's discipleship, should never be a mortuary focus, because if it is, the disciple lives only for death - not life. Our focus should be on life and it more abundantly for all.

Hear once again Matthew's words of Jesus:

...<sup>38</sup>and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup>Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:38, RSV)

In Matthew, taking up the cross of Jesus is all about a disciple assuming their responsibilities of self-expenditure unto self-sacrifice as they go about life as compassionate healers, doers of justice, practitioners of compassion, and teachers of the Good News. Such actions place the disciples squarely in God's will in this life and the one to come.

In closing let me share a very profound thought from a great theologian and religious visionary, Martin Luther. Luther said that, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.

I guess a timely question would be, "How much is our religion worth?" How much is it worth to us, to the world, and to God's coming kingdom on earth? Is it worth flinging open the doors of our lives and proclaiming and giving witness to the Good News, or do we just want to keep it here, behind closed doors; after all, no one knows what goes on behind closed doors.

So, my friend, Frank Kuykendall, was more profound than I thought, when he said, "I don't want a mansion over the hill top, I just want to get in." I know, I hear you. I must understand as we get older, our world begins to shrink to the limits of our abilities and our own life weariness. We don't really have that much to offer any more - baloney! At this time in our lives, we have the greatest of all things to offer a world gone crazy. What, you ask? We have experience, we have clarified life priorities, and we have proven the power of the Gospel. We know for a fact that a person can live through the worst of their mistakes, sins, and the effects of the sins of others - no sin is insurmountable. We know where the rubber hits the road in the gospel is in living a good life and in one's wholesome relationships to others, creation, and creature - not death. Share this, make yourselves available to others and share what you've learned, what you have proven by your faith in God. I say this with great confidence because most of us still know the difference between Cornflakes and a jigsaw puzzle.

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