

The Gospel according to Matthew, the 10th Chapter

[Jesus said to the twelve:] 24 “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; 25it 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!

26 “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

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

34 “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

35 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;

36and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

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

“Why are you Black?” a white kid asked me at the park some years ago. I had just arrived in Texas as a graduate student from Tanzania, and honestly, until this point, I had not thought of myself in colors. “OMG! you don’t ask people those questions-honey!” her mom tried to apologetically silence him. “I can take his question! – it is okay – it is a valid question” I told her. “Are you sure?” she checked with me between nervousness and a shame, “Why are you black” the boy repeated his question curiously as if to ignore his mother’s fear. And I listened with love.

I gently moved myself close to the kid who probably had never touched a black skin before to attempt his curiosity. I kneeled down friendly to his height, not because I had an answer, but to attend to his innocence. As a teacher, I have learned to “trust” that every question is genuine before I can despise it.

As I allowed myself to be vulnerable to the query about “why!”, in my mind I am thinking:

“Was this a religious question – because it has elements creation and existence” - “Why are you black?

“was this a personal question, intrusive anyhow to my personal space –”

“Or maybe this was a political; socio-economic question – with anything to do with immigration or slavery?” or it was just the question.

Look! It has been only a few months in America and at the University of Texas as an international student we were told from the very first week during the school orientation that: “Americans are *really* friendly. We love meeting people, are curious about outsiders, and we love talking about anything and everything...BUT:”

- Avoid discussing politics if at all cost ...
- Avoid talks about people’s “religion” topics
- Do not ask “personal questions, ---because ...they are personal...
- Be careful on how you talk about people’s “economy’ – or “Race” – Even though one will learn later that a lot of policy decisions have all of those elements.

If you want to have deeper conversations, talk about:

- Food you like, restaurant that opened up, hotdogs, pats
- Sports, books you enjoy reading, tv shows, travels, hobbies....
- Or about favorite apps – (because in those places we are able to use anonymous ID’s and hide in our superficial world.
- “If you need to be like: talk about the blooming flowers and how bad traffic is....
- In those topics people will like you, they will welcome you in their space, they will not be afraid to engage with you.

Other subjects will lead you to a heated conversation. You will offend or upset someone and people will not like you” we were told.

These memories came back to me this week as I was reading this text.

Attending to that lecture more than 8 years ago, my first impression of America was that: “people do not talk” - people are taught not to speak. But at the same time, I was thinking “wait a minute” were people actually taught not to **speak** or simply were afraid to **listen**? Because America is not known by “not speaking” – in fact “speaking” is the most defended principle of the constitution. So today I want to challenge you to ask yourselves are you afraid to “speak out” or to “listen?”

As a Christian, how often or harder do we find ourselves engaging into uncomfortable conversations? how are those conversations address issues that matter in our lives, our community or nations? What role do we play as the body of Christ in the content of those conversations? These are questions that I ask myself as I read this text.

I don’t know for you, but what I found interesting in this whole chapter of Mathew, was not the terrifying truth of Jesus to his disciples, but the “listening” ability of disciples - to the truth that was very terrifying. Very often, in these kinds of teachings, one disciple or two would interrupt Jesus and ask questions for clarity....but here...you have the most tormenting chapter in the New Testament and yet disciples are immensely listening. Their level of listening is even horrifying than the horror of the teaching itself.

And to make myself clear, I am not saying that they were silent, neither were they simply quiet – but listening. Very often people stay silent or quiet to ignore.

Or we stay silent and quiet not because we are thinking about what we are hearing, but because we are thinking of what to say next, - but listening requires another set of skills – the skill that can transform our experiences and knowledge.

Yet, listening is terrifying – especially listening to truth!

It is often easier to speak about truth than to listen to the truth. How many of us prefer to listen when being told what to do? Sometimes “listening” is confused with “silence” – and we chose to stay silent instead of acting, or sometimes “listening” is confused with “quiet” – and we choose to stay quiet until we feel that our power is being taken away. Silence brings an impression that the other side is winning the conversation and attempting to change us by somehow forging its values to our values. But in this text, “listening” is credited to those who have acquired a “discipleship” status – the ability to consume the experience and make it our own. It is this kind of listening that may lead us to ask questions or being asked, as we I allow ourselves to be challenged by the fact that “our reality” is not universal or our reality is not a status quo. Even when our reality is “the reality,” I want us to know today that “reality” is not stable, or shared equally across, until we choose to “construct” it in a shared space. We cannot share a space of individual realities without adhering to individual experiences. We can transform what “we know” from listening.

Again, I am not speaking about “staying silent.” While silence can mean isolating yourself from awkwardness, “listening” is a preparation for you and me, to take in the mastery level of accepting the fact that realities exist. Realities that the world is not soft for all, even if it is soft for me, reality that the world is not just, the reality that the world is not equal, is not peaceful. You can choose to listen or to be silent about these realities.

We however, tend to prefer “speech” over “listening” - Because somehow “speaking” gives us to express the supremacy of our knowing. But according to this text, speaking is almost sequential

to listening, it gives us an “apostolic” status – which is in this case the ability to connect the experience of Jesus with our experience to share with others.

So, like in a graduation, Jesus is using his own experience as a final lecture, as if telling them, now that you have been sitting on my laps for three years, attending my teachings, you must put to practice what you have learned in the real world. And that real world is not going to be soft. In this chapter we see this shift between the two terms: “disciples” and “apostles”. Vers 1 & 2.

The whole chapter does not help us to think that “the good news” should always be “good!” But here, Jesus destroys the notion that “the gospel will always bring peace.” Or that the “good news” will always be good! As much as He cares about their wellbeing, He wants the disciples to swallow the bitterness of the curing truth.

How do we relate with this reality today? I know, with all that is going on in our world, many of our people call for our churches to stay “neutral.” And that for many means staying away from politics. They believe on the “neutrality” of the gospel. As one individual commented on the ELCA Facebook page, under Bishop Eaton’s condemnation of the death of George: “I have no idea where my pastor stands politically. He just preaches the Word. I wish that you would do the same. Please stay away from politics.” I wish to ask that pastor: Are you afraid to face the real world or you are simply able to stay silent? Because “neutrality” is a privilege, and does not mean taking no position.

Another person added, “I’m afraid the ELCA is moving away from its center focus of worship and sharing the Good News and have entered into being yet another social club, ... is that the call of the church in the way it is being done?” To this person I would ask, Are you afraid to speak out or to listen? Where is the church sent to if not into the world?

Jesus sends his disciples to face the reality. He instructs them to practice their theology in the real social life! He sends them in the world that has the Emperor, the persecuting soldiers. ...the world that has Pharisees and Anti Christs.

And yet, “have no fear, do not fear, do not be afraid” he tells them.

Jesus understood that “Fear” does not come from the outside but it generates from within us. Our outside world no matter how threatening, must be perceived through the spirit of “unpreparedness” to cause fear within us. We fear from within, as we engage with our world. And even when we are so fearful, it is not because the world is that too terrible, but because we lack the right courage to approach it. When we are afraid, we doubt our spiritual skills and everything becomes a threat. Our misinformed “realities” start to point to the “beast” that is out there to get us. Our neighbors start to look like savage enemies. But if we are all assured of the Truth of the Gospel, we are skilled to react with “Love” even when the response we get is not pleasant.

How do we get there? Where “Love” reigns over “fear.” We cannot get there by listening to our misguided fears, but we can get there through our true devotion to Jesus. We can get there by being truthful to our call; that we are called to “listen” and sent to “speak” the truth of the gospel.

I invite you to interrogate yourself today, as Jesus speaks among us. What stage are you in? You might be in a “listening” stage, but I assure you listening is not going to be “soft” as you think. If you are not prepared to “listen” you might want to “speak” immaturely. You must create that space in your heart - because remember, issues that face our community are real and already have divided our families; you might disagree with your children, parents or friends - but if it is your time to “listen” – please be prepared to listen **more** no matter how painful that “reality” might sound to you.

Or this might be your time to “speak” – but still Jesus warns you, it is not going to be about a nice weather and blooming flowers by Mississippi river. We are sent to carry the “truth” of the gospel that must come **in contact** with the truth of the world. And Jesus makes it clear, “this is not the truth that applies to those “Gentiles” and “Samaritans...” **who must change to fit “our truth”** ... but this is the “truth” that starts from our own homes and families. It is within our own kind and our social groups where we are sent to start “those conversations” and to “speak” out our fears.

Do not simply stay “silent” – because when our silence makes us feel comfortable, Mathew 7:15 warns us that ravening wolves “come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening

wolves”. When our silence makes us believe that the wolves are out there on that side and not here, Paul reminds us (Acts 20:29-30) wolves are everywhere even “among ourselves savage wolves will rise up”. This is not the time to defend ourselves from the “otherness” but to devote to the ONE who called us to listen attentively and speak with courage.

We are called at difficult times to an uncomfortable space. We are called to deconstruct the status quo. We are called to disrupt the romanticized narrative that honors the beauty of dehumanization. We are called to challenge our “calmness” in the expense of “other’s tears.” We must unmask our unconscious and values that, that we might have held them dearly. We must peel to its inner core our Christian belief.

You and I have that opportunity to rethink our call. Again, we have a choice to listen, knowing there are people out there who hunger for us to step up but are simply “silenced” not only to stay “quiet” but to be “breathless.” We choose to speak the truth knowing that there are people out there who desire for such truth and yet they are voiceless not because they cannot speak, but because their truth cannot be heard or trusted.

We are called for a radical commitment to Jesus. The commitment that requires sharing our “fears” with Jesus himself and “consoling each other.” As the ELCA presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton said recently, “let us be even more intentional sharing with each other, easing each other’s burdens, consoling each other in our fear and grief, condemning what is contrary to the gospel and living out our baptismal covenant to strive for justice and peace in all the earth”

Amen