

Freedom From Fear

Matthew 10:24-39

June 25, 2017

In 2011 a book was released about God and God's love for all creation, at least that is what Rob Bell thought Love Wins was about when he wrote it. At the time Bell was the Pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan and known worldwide. He had written numerous books by this point and had release a series of videos called Nooma. Bell's church was what we call today a Megachurch when he was there, but when Love Wins was released something unexpected happened, people turned against him, calling him a heretic among other things. There are some reports that the church lost 3,000 members because of the book and when asked about it Bell said the book put a lot of pressure on people in his church. He said congregants were telling him that family and friends were relentless in asking them why they were allowing themselves to be led by a false teacher. Ultimately, everything changed for Bell and his family as he resigned from the church and moved to southern California. Everything changed because he decided to share the good news of God's never-ending love for all creation. And even though he may not have known this sharing God's love for all creation would make him controversial, by writing this book and having it published, Bell had made the decision to stand up for his beliefs.

Now for a large percentage of people there are certain things in life that are to be avoided at all costs. Like disagreements, or facing someone we know is either frustrated with us or disappointed in something we have done. It seems all situations likes these feel hard to deal with.

It certainly doesn't make it any easier when the disagreement, or the frustration or disappointment is with a family member, right? Adding this additional element only causes the difficulty we are facing to multiply leaving us paralyzed by the what ifs circling in our minds. Most of the time the end result is avoidance. Sometimes it is avoidance of the people themselves while other times it is avoidance of the topic that has caused the disagreement, frustration or disappointment. Not that avoidance ever makes any of it go away, its just that in that moment we believe it easier to avoid.

There are 2 topics that seem to be off-limits for almost everyone, unless of course you know beforehand whose side the other person is on: Religion and Politics! For reasons we don't have time to explore today, these 2 topics are so divisive that even families aren't immune to being torn apart because of them. When the tearing apart begins I want to scream WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON HERE because I'm not sure I really understand why relationships can be destroyed by such things. Yet I know it happens and it happens more often than I would like. In fact, history shows us it was happening from the start and our present day shows us it continues.

When it comes to religion, I've been wondering lately if there is something so inherent to the topic itself that just holding different opinions, different beliefs and/or different understandings could divide people who love one another? Now last week I asked some serious questions about discovering your passions in hopes that we begin to explore ways we can expand the ministry of

this church beyond our physical space. Today I again am asking serious questions... What is it about the topic of religion that can lead to such divisiveness amongst people, even people of the same family? Questions like these deserve our attention just like the topic did when Jesus foreshadowed for his Disciples that their current relationships could be severed in the days ahead as they began to venture out and speak about this radical new understanding of religion. We must remember “[T]he Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus creating life with a whole variety of people and carrying out the mission of caring for the lost, the down-trodden, and the forgotten. Jesus was a border-crossing, taboo-breaking refugee who sought to break down barriers by creating companionship.”¹

You see, I believe Jesus was telling his Disciples that their relationships may suffer when he told them in verse 34 “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” If taken literally those words seem pretty harsh, not to mention they seem to say the opposite of who he was and what we know about his ministry of grace and peace to all of creation. In fact, I initially resist associating these words with Christ. They just don’t seem to fit, and quite frankly they sound wrong. In my mind I have a difficult time connecting “Not peace but a sword,” with the Jesus I claim to know. I wonder though, just like so many of us who avoid discussing things like religion, if my resistance is for another reason entirely... like the fact that I KNOW IT’S TRUE! When people answer the call to speak about their truth and stand up for their beliefs, division may result. The thing is that possibility of division should never stop any of us from speaking the truth, doing what is right and standing up for our beliefs.

The question then becomes, why are doing right and speaking the truth about doing right the reason for arguments, hurt feelings or division? Is that really what doing right and speaking the truth are meant to cause? Surely, we would all respond “NO” to such questions. Sadly though, when the truth is calling people to a whole new way of life, a whole new way of understanding who they are in this life, argument, resistance, fighting and division most often result. That, it seems, is what Jesus is teaching when he tells his Disciples to anticipate some relationship problems, even from members of your own family when you begin publicly sharing the truth about God’s Kingdom.

You know, that Kingdom that disrupts oppression.

That Kingdom that unsettles.

That Kingdom that upends empires of oppression masquerading as champions of peace.

That Kingdom that calls into question the rulers and systems that promise peace but really swing a sword of terror and use weapons to force allegiance.

Expect strong resistance when telling people the Truth about God’s Kingdom that “comes with the demands on which true peace insists... love and acceptance of someone’s authentic self.” Expect strong resistance when telling people the Truth about God’s Kingdom that “never lets go of the kind of peace God has in mind.”² You know, that kind of peace that comes only from loving everything and everyone in creation the way we love ourselves.

I happen to believe this is rather remarkable advice for all of us, but I also know how difficult it is. Truth telling about an Expansive God reaching out to all of creation... truth telling about an

¹ <https://sojo.net/articles/sponsored/facing-down-kkk-story-koinonia-farm-and-christian-hospitality>

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4927>

Expansive God who always goes looking for the sheep, no matter what, is risky business. This is what Jesus was telling his Disciples and he was direct about it, maybe even a little intimidating, but at least he let them know what to expect. Maybe Jesus was wanting them to know that when you stand up and speak out for what you believe, people start falling away, and there was no easy comforting way to say it.

Jesus is letting them know that when you finally stand up and speak out about God's love and acceptance of everyone, current relationships will change and some will even end altogether. In fact, there is a good chance nothing will be the same, and in this world of social media, people may start to unfriend or unfollow you, or troll and bully you. Jesus seems to be saying that these are just some of the consequences for standing up for what you believe... especially for those standing up and speaking the truth about their belief in God's love for all of creation.

History has proven this in many different contexts, right? Think about the way women have worked tirelessly to speak the truth of being called into the workforce, or better yet being called into vocational ministry. Or how about people of color having to decide, not once, not twice but countless times, whether or not they speak the truth and name their fear of a country in which systemic racism continues to be validated.

I can't help but wonder if the Church claiming to follow this Jesus is even ready to listen to his words. You see, to listen to these words of advice, means decisions have to be made. Decisions about who the Church really is and what message it is really trying to tell. Listening to these words will make "the church decide whether or not it will actually tell the truth of the Gospel -- the Gospel that brings true peace to those who suffer, to those in need of healing, to those marginalized, to those demonized, to those oppressed; God's true peace, realized and known in gladness and joy, fulfillment and contentedness, happiness and blessedness."³ In my opinion, a Church choosing this path is a Church free from fear. It is a Church who hears Jesus' command that it not be afraid.

If we choose to listen and look for meaning behind our literal understanding of his words, Jesus is letting us know potential difficulties in speaking the truth of the Gospel. Yet, of all the commands in the entire Bible, there is one repeated more than any and it is found 3 times in today's reading... "Don't Be Afraid." 3 small simple words if left by themselves, but when placed together and point to our need to stand and speak the truth of the Gospel message will lead to powerfully positive transformation.

The thing is if we want to influence anyone, even members of our family who disagree with us we can lead the way through our own actions. No one is going to change their worldview or religious view because of something posted to social media, but when they see us following through on these claims of love for everyone, they can't help but notice.

The challenge we face, just like the challenge those first Disciples faced is being courageous in the face of opposition, especially opposition from those who love you. This is why, I believe, Jesus said he didn't come for peace because Jesus knew better than anyone that having that kind

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4927>

of courage was no small task. All of us would much rather fight against evil, not against those we love and those that love us. Here is the thing, though, avoiding them or avoiding talking about certain things doesn't honor you nor does it really honor them.

Don't be afraid!
Be courageous!
Do not fear!

Even if there is a period of time when you are thought of as strange, or an outsider...

Don't be afraid!
Be courageous!
Do not fear!

Because eventually you'll earn your right to freedom and when you do so fear will no longer make your decisions for you. And then there will come a time when you might hear them say, "oh there goes _____ again. That's just what she does. Or they'll think, _____ has another crazy idea... but the last one worked out pretty well for him."

And you want to know something, every once in a while a funny thing happens: those initial nay-sayers learn from the decisions you made, and how you stepped out and faced down your fears. And then maybe they will talk about you in a different way.

So for those of us being made to feel that cultural conformity is more important than anything else, where non-conformity is misunderstood as a threat to the establishment, or for anyone who feels pressured to be like those around them, it's all up to you to lead by example. Who knows—maybe some will be transformed with you.

AMEN!