

June 25, 2023  
Matthew 10:24-39

Pentecost 4  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Straight Talk”

“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

After enduring one year in an on-campus student residence at university, I moved to an off-campus house that was largely populated by pre-med students. As a student whose classes were mostly in the humanities, I had little knowledge of the experience of those on the other side of campus in the science buildings (we had to take one year of a basic-level science course; after that I rarely darkened the doors of those buildings). I quickly discovered that the experience of my new housemates was radically different than mine since they were involved in a very competitive field of study in which many entering students would not finish the four-year course at Ursinus. They were expected to take classes in all the sciences that included several hours per week in labs, and their workload meant that many would study into the night. For those who successfully completed the pre-med program, the rate of acceptance to major medical schools was very high, and the university’s reputation as an important undergraduate school for medical students was very good. For the remaining years of my university education, I learned how challenging life could be for my housemates as they strived to complete their very challenging courses.

One course that had a reputation for being very difficult was organic chemistry, known by its nickname “O Chem.” I cannot say that I understand exactly what this course was about, since even a simple explanation proved to be incomprehensible to me. It was taught by Dr. Roger Staeger, who was known internationally for his invention of Welch Ade grape drink (which many students referred to as “Staeger Ade”). To an outsider like me, Dr. Staeger seemed to be a very nice person; but to his students, he proved to be the most demanding of teachers. His first class of the course was legendary; he would begin by warning his students that this would be the most difficult class they would ever take, and that he would not accept anything but their very best. He invited anyone who did not want to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the work that was expected of them to drop the class immediately. You could always tell who the organic chemistry students were on campus by the shellshocked look on their faces during the first week of a semester; but for those who survived the course, they would look back on that first class meeting and

remember how they appreciated Dr. Staeger's honesty in giving them a straight talk as to what would be involved should they choose to continue in his class.

As difficult as it may seem at first, straight talk often proves to be a tremendous blessing for us. A doctor who sits us down and offers straight talk on our medical condition gives us an honest appraisal of our situation, allowing us to plan for a course of treatment without any doubt as to where we stand. A true friend is often a person who gives us a straight talk on something that is affecting our lives, refusing to sugarcoat a situation or ignore the "elephant in the room." Relationships that are built on love and trust also include straight talk in which partners know that they can share the truth about what is happening in their lives without fear of being rejected or having our opinions discounted. As stated by author Eric F. Douglas, *"when we think of straight talk, we imagine a world where everyone takes responsibility for clear, honest, and open communication."*

In his ministry that centered on proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus communicated in clear, honest, and open communication that at times may seem harsh but gave his would-be followers the straight talk that was necessary for those who would become his disciples. Jesus knows the challenges he faces in proclaiming the Word of God that will meet with tremendous opposition from those who place their own interpretations of what it means to be a follower of God over what God truly expects of God's people, and he warns those who would follow him that they should expect the same opposition in their own lives. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus engages in a bit of proverbial wisdom by warning his followers that *"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."* (Matthew 10:24-25a). Only Jesus can be understood as the teacher (*"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students."* – 23:8), so the saying is no longer general but refers concretely to the Christian's relation to Christ. "Servant" and "Lord" likewise portray the relation of the Christian to Jesus. Matthew underscores the parallel between Jesus and the disciples to whom he entrusts his mission. As he has been persecuted, likewise they will also be persecuted. As he did not retaliate but withdrew in the face of such suffering, so also the disciples are not to respond to hostility in kind or with prayers for vengeance but are to withdraw and continue their mission elsewhere *"in the glad confidence that the Parousia of the Son of Man will bring the divine kingdom to full reality."* (M. Eugene Boring). As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, *"if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."* (5:39-41).

Jesus' reference to his being called "Beelzebul" refers to the accusation the Pharisees leveled against him after he cast out a demon who had possessed a man: "*By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons*" (9:34). "Beelzebul" was a name for Satan that literally means "Lord of the house," with reference to Satan's power in the world. Based on their accusation that Jesus is driving out demons through the power of "*Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons*" (12:24) the religious leaders of the people will plot to kill him ("*But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him how to destroy him*" – 12:14). If this is what they do to "the master of the house," Jesus warns, "those of his household" (the disciples) should not expect better treatment. Jesus' words are directed to disciple communities who experience such rejection and persecution, and who may be afraid to speak out boldly for their new faith. This may be why Jesus encourages these followers to "*have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.*" (10:26). Jesus is addressing disciples who already profess Christian faith but are fearful of bearing public witness to it in the church's mission. Their message is in continuity with that of Jesus (and John the Baptist) in proclaiming the kingdom of God:

- "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" – 3:1-2.
- "From that time on Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" – 4:17.
- "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" – 10:7.

Jesus entrusts the full gospel message to his disciples, and others are dependant on them to proclaim it for their salvation. Therefore, even though they will be persecuted like their teacher and Lord, they must not be afraid. What they have learned from Jesus they must "*tell in the light,*" and what they have heard from him in private they must "*proclaim from the housetops*" (10:27).

- "In sum, Jesus addresses the Twelve in a very straightforward way about the opposition they will encounter on the mission he is giving them. Matthew records these words for future disciples, whose lot will be the same." – Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri.

Jesus' straight talk with his disciples about the opposition they will face in proclaiming the Gospel is accompanied by a word of comfort and strength that assures them that no matter how overwhelming the obstacles before them may be, they must never be afraid because they are always in the presence of the God of

steadfast love who has always been a source of confidence for God's people even the face of situations that may at the time appear hopeless. Jesus reminds them that even sparrows who are sold two for a penny are precious in God's eyes, for "*not one of them will fall to the ground apart from you Father*" (10:29), and that God's loving care for each of his children is so great that "*even the hairs of your head are all counted*" (10:30). Jesus therefore encourages those who will continue his work of proclaiming the kingdom of heaven to "*not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*" (10:31). In this sure and certain knowledge of the perfect love of God that casts out fear (1 John 4:18), Jesus' disciples are to go forth in the same boldness with which our Lord proclaimed God's Word no matter how great the opposition might appear: "*Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.*" (10:32-33).

- "They must not fear men. Men can do them no harm, for the power of men ceases with the death of the body. But they must overcome fear of death with the fear of God. The danger lies not in the judgment of men, but in the judgment of God, not in the death of the body, but in the eternal destruction of the body and soul. Those who are still afraid of men have no fear of God, and those who have fear of God have ceased to be afraid of men. All preachers of the gospel will do well to recollect this saying daily." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Jesus continues his teaching to his disciples with what for many is one of his most challenging and disturbing sayings. For those who celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the coming of the "Prince of Peace," Jesus' warning to his followers – "*do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*" (10:34) – seems to contradict our most basic understandings of the identity of Jesus the Messiah. In this context, however, "sword" is not used as a political symbol or as a weapon of warfare, but refers to an image of the final conflict at the end of the age and of the suffering and discord that God's people will experience:

- "For by fire will the LORD execute judgment, and by his sword, on all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many." – Isaiah 66:16.
- "Fire and hail and famine and pestilence, all these have been created for vengeance; the fangs of wild animals and scorpions and vipers, and the sword that punishes the ungodly with destruction." – Sirach 39:29-30.

- “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” – Luke 2:34-35.

This text reflects the real situation in Matthew’s church, where people sometimes had to choose between their family and their faith. It is quite likely that the community that Matthew addresses in his Gospel had experienced such family divisions and that some had even been turned out of their families because of their confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Becoming a Christian meant renouncing the faith that one’s family had practiced for generations; in a time when there was no such thing as separation of church and state, confessing faith in Jesus Christ could also be seen as an act of treason, since the Roman Emperor was worshipped as a god. It was to such a displaced community that the First Letter of Peter is written, when the Apostle writes “*once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*” (1 Peter 2:10). Jesus’ stern warning that “*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*” (10:35-36) are the fulfillment of the prophecy of Micah that had warned those who would be faithful to the Lord of such a cost for their faithfulness:

- “Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household. But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.” – Micah 7:5-7.

While not all disciples will face such opposition from their families and loved ones, Jesus warns that there may come a time when disciples will have to choose between loyalty to Jesus and loyalty to one’s family; in such circumstances, loyalty to Jesus has priority over even the closest human relationships and even life itself: “*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.*” (10:37-38). Discipleship is represented not as adding on another worthy cause to one’s list of obligations, but a giving of self that is the ultimate self-fulfillment. The claim that Jesus makes, as outrageous as it may appear on the surface, in truth represents an implied Christology, for “*Jesus claims for himself what only a deity can appropriately claim.*” (Boring). The proclamation

of the kingdom of heaven will cause division not because of the message itself but because of the ways people receive it.

- “His coming among us will not be viewed as an occasion for celebration by everyone. It is not a time for party hats and gift bags. Not everyone will be glad to see Jesus or to have his presence as the center point in their lives. His coming initially stokes division. Peace? Not yet! Quite the contrary, it will be a time of heightened tensions and disagreements when people will have to declare whether they are for or against Jesus. These deep divisions and fissures will be felt most intently in one’s own household ... His very presence will be opposed by some, and will cause others to stumble, and this sometimes in the same family.” – Cleophus J. LaRue.

Although not every disciple will be called to actual martyrdom, all are called to die daily to self, for *“those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”* (10:39). In his teaching on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism in the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches that baptism *“signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”* Those who seek happiness in life by pursuing their own interests will never be fulfilled; *“only by giving one’s self to God and others do we experience the lasting fulfillment God wants us to have.”* (Mitch and Sri).

- “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call ... The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life.” – Bonhoeffer.

Not every student who enrolled in Dr. Staeger’s Organic Chemistry class took his straight talk to heart; but these were usually the students who failed the class. For those who heeded his stern warning, they knew that this would be a most challenging course, and they devoted themselves to working hard to meet their professor’s demands and expectations. But those who devoted themselves to their course, which often meant sacrificing other activities, were rewarded with an education that they would appreciate for the rest of their lives. The cost inherent in Dr. Staeger’s course might have been great, but they discovered the reward was far greater.

Our Lord's call to discipleship involves straight talk that might sound harsh, and for many it is a cost that will turn many away. But for those who answer this call, who choose to follow our Lord as his disciples, we will discover along with St. Paul the blessings that await us when *"forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 2:13-14). Straight talk may be hard to hear, but it is the truth that can transform our lives and is at the heart of the most trusting and intimate of relationships. We hear the straight talk of Jesus not as words that seek to divide us from those we love, but the words of the one who loves us that calls us to follow him in the way that will lead to light and live in the presence of our God of steadfast love, the one we follow knowing that whatever we leave behind will pale in comparison to the blessings that are ours as children of God.

Amen.