

**[SLIDE 'Using the Steel to Heal']** – June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020

My daughter Gabriella graduated from Bowling Green State University last month and is taking a teaching position out of the state. A few weeks ago, we flew to South Carolina to get a lay of the land. In this time of COVID, we had special face masks for the flight down. **[SLIDE - Picture of face mask(s)]** Though we had identical masks, my wife gave us separate containers to store them in so we could reuse them for the flight back. After we landed, I separated the masks into their respective containers and told Gabriella which bag contained her mask. Don't ask me why I didn't think to label the bags. Two days later, when it was time to leave, I asked Gab which mask was hers. She didn't remember. I said, "I told you which container yours was in!" She responded, "You tell me a lot of things, I didn't know I was supposed to remember that one specific piece of information."

In this reading from Matthew, we have a list of information and instructions from Jesus. Any one of these instructions can stand as a full sermon. They each take time to digest. Today, I want to focus on verse 34 **[SLIDE. Matthew 10:34. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."]** A sword? Not many of us know much about swords. Probably most of us don't even own one. When we think of swords, we think of fighting and life and death on the line.

I want to contrast this sentence with a similar one in the book of Luke. In Luke, Jesus says, **[SLIDE Luke 12:51,53. "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division... They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."]**

Both Luke and Matthew talk about the division in our relationships when we take up our cross. Luke talks about the division in relations that can occur in our lives of faith. Matthew brings in the sword to emphasize this division. Unfortunately, over the centuries, many have used select passages of the Bible to promote violence, and this is one of those passages. Many Biblical scholars will tell you, and I agree, that violence is not what Jesus is advocating for when he speaks of the sword. After all, Jesus used no violence during his ministry and goes willingly to the cross.

In this same Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is arrested and taken to trial, one of the men with Jesus draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus tells him in **[SLIDE. Matthew 26: 52, “Put your sword back in its place.. for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”]** Jesus never advocates violence.

It is a sad but real part of our Christian history that for centuries the most dangerous time to be a Jew, year after year, was on Good Friday. This is when Biblical texts were read in churches of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, and then Christians went out and attacked synagogues and Jews. How could we get it so wrong? We sit in the darkness of Good Friday, knowing full well that Easter Sunday is but two days away. We know that even though Jesus dies on the cross, God brings Jesus through death. This is good news for all of humanity, and it is not time to blame and attack others. Good Friday is a space for us to recognize the sin that permeates every one of us, and to know that Jesus freely bears all our sins, so that we may live in peace and unity with each other.

So the writer of Matthew brings in the sword to illustrate division that can occur when we take up our cross. **[SLIDE – picture of a scalpel]**. The steel of the sword is like the steel that

surgeons use. Sharp steel instruments are used in surgery, not to destroy the body, but to separate and remove that which is causing us harm. The saying goes like this, “This patient needs the steel to heal!” Once the tumor or harmful growth is separated from the body, then the healing can begin.

Jesus knows that divisions will occur, and they will hurt. Some divisions and separations will be close and within tight circles of families and friends. But choices have to be made, and God’s kingdom is at stake. The truth is, God’s kingdom is coming whether we join it or not. That’s why we have this saying of Jesus, **[SLIDE Matthew 10: 39 “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”]** It’s a choice we make. Know too that those we separate from may one day follow our example and pick up their cross as well.

Jesus does not leave us to travel this road alone. The Gospel of Matthew was written as a handbook for early Christians on how to be a follower of Christ, and how to live in community together. It is believed that Matthew is written to an audience of Jewish Christians who were in a relationship with Jewish synagogues and their members. Readers of Matthew are assumed to understand the Jewish contexts of the stories.

Matthew’s Gospel gives attention to the character that early Christians and their communities are to have. The sermon on the mount, found in Matthew, is a collection of instructions on the way Christians are ‘to be’ in the world.

**[SLIDE Matthew 5: 3-12.**

**“Blessed are the poor in spirit,**

**for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**4 Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.**

**5 Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.**

**6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.**

**7 Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.**

**8 Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.**

**9 Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.**

**10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil  
against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven,  
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. ]**

Not much violence there. The only hint of violence is how the world may treat us, and not how we are to treat the world. Though we live in a violent world, that is not our story. God gives us the power to rule over evil through Jesus. We can choose our path and our way ‘to be’ in the world. We can choose peace. Though divisions will occur, and some of them as

sharp as can be divided by a knife or sword, we know that we are siding with God. **[SLIDE Matthew 16:18 “I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”]**

We may be separate from others in this world, but we are near to God. This life will one day end, but God’s assurance of saving our souls is revealed at the empty tomb, because the powers of death shall not prevail.

Maybe you will need to use the metaphorical ‘the steel to heal’ in your relationships. Maybe some separations occur because you choose to belong to the body of Christ, and place your hope in Jesus. Perhaps you see what is happening in the world and struggle with violence to make things right. Know that it is in our weakness, by binding with Christ that we are made strong. **[SLIDE – ‘In our weakness, through Christ, we are made strong!']** Though the world can take our lives, God has power over life and our souls.

Jesus calls us to use the sword metaphorically to separate ourselves from the evil that surrounds us. We are called to separate from our comfort zones if they are void of God's purposes. We are called to accompany others who are vulnerable, even if that separates us from the crowd we are familiar and comfortable with. The language of God is that of peace and love. It speaks to us from the cross and calls us into eternity. AMEN