

“Swords and Crosses”

Matthew 10:24-39

The leader and facilitator of a workshop at a local church introduced a discussion by showing two images of Jesus.

The first was a painting by Stephen Sawyer, titled “Undeclared.” He depicts Jesus as a boxer standing inside a boxing ring. In his corner, we find the word “Savior” printed on the protective padding of the corner post and hanging from the ropes are the boxing gloves with the word “mercy” written upon them.

When the speaker flashed the image on the screen, he heard a gasp from Jackie, a lady sitting near the front row. She was shaking her head, and exclaiming, “No, no, that’s not my Jesus! That image is just wrong.”

Later, she would talk about how the image of Jesus she holds onto is the Jesus who is the Prince of Peace. That image of Jesus dressed as a boxer was the furthest thing from a Prince of Peace.

The image of Jesus as an undefeated boxer was followed by another image — this one by Nathan Greene, titled “The Good Shepherd.” This image shows Jesus holding a black lamb.

When looking at these images side by side, one has to ask, “How did we go from an image of a loving, compassionate Good Shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep to one of Jesus standing in the corner of a boxing ring and ready to fight?”

We all have an image or two of Jesus. These conceptions tell us more about ourselves and our theology than they do about Jesus, for whom no real physical description exists.

Jackie had a point though. What do we do with the image of someone who says, “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother”? (v. 35).

What do we do with words like, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me”? (v. 37). How would Jackie respond to someone who said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”? (v. 34).

When we ponder the image of Jesus Christ that is at the core of our belief and understanding of who Jesus is,

- do we picture a Jesus who brings division or one who seeks unity?
- do we think of Jesus in terms of one who is the Prince of Peace, or a fighter?
- is Jesus someone who would encourage taking up the sword or taking up the cross?

Jackie believed in a Jesus who brings peace and seeks unity.

She does not believe in a warrior Jesus wearing boxing gloves or a scabbard and sword.

Would it make any difference if we understood that the sword Jesus brings to us is not made of steel, but wood — the wood of a cross? Jesus asks us to pick up our cross, and, if we don't, we cannot be his follower.

When we hear Jesus say, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” we think of a long blade of Toledo steel that has been forged and hammered into a weapon with a pointed end for thrusting and sharpened edges for slicing and cutting.

There are many types of swords. Some are short; others are long. Some are straight, while others have a curved blade. No matter the shape or size, each of them has one main purpose and that is to cut, slice or divide something. The sword seems to be associated with violence, whether as a weapon held by a soldier marching off to war or kept in the home for self-defense. In the many ways we might describe the sword, it stands as an antithesis to a peaceful existence.

Throughout the Bible, we discover various references to swords. Usually, the sword is referred to as an instrument of a violent death as, for example, in Numbers: “And you will fall by the sword” (14:43). Swords produce death. Consider also Psalm 22: “Deliver my soul from the sword” (v. 20).

Swords are also referenced metaphorically, describing the greed of those with power and their swords being like teeth of those who would devour the poor (Proverbs 30:14). “There are those whose teeth are swords, whose teeth are knives, to devour the poor off the earth, the needy from among mortals”.

Both Micah and Isaiah encourage beating the swords into something they see as more useful to the common good: ploughshares. Nations should not take up the sword against nations, nor teach war anymore.

None of these images brings to mind an image of a sword that does not have the potential to bring harm or even death. Perhaps that is why we hear the voice of a little shepherd boy named David standing before Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, announcing to the taunting giant and all the Philistines “that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear!”

Even Jesus, who in Matthew says, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” and who in Luke says, “the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one” will later denounce the sword. When a sword is used to defend Jesus, he promptly orders that it be put away. He then heals the wound caused by the sword. In this very moment, even as those who would arrest him come carrying swords, he instructs the disciples to put away the sword, “for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (26:52).

Nowhere does Jesus support the use of a sword. Sometimes, these verses are used to support an image of a Jesus who condones violence toward others and supports the division of families. So, what is Jesus really saying here? This passage is really about discipleship.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives a mission to the disciples, sending them out to heal, share the good news and ask for nothing in return.

However, Jesus also follows this up with a cost associated with discipleship. The disciples likely expected that their mission would be a successful one, and that by following Jesus, prosperity would follow.

But what Jesus actually says here is this: “Do not assume that because you’re a student and follower of mine that it’s going to be all apple pie and roses. Wrong! What is likely to happen is

that father will be set against son, daughter against mother. In other words, a lot of people, including your family members, will not get it. They will probably think you're nuts."

That's Jesus' warning. Following Jesus may feel more like a sword than a bath towel, more like the thorn than the rose itself. Jesus tells them that he cannot win for losing. No good deed goes unpunished. He will heal people, forgive and feed them and his enemies will call him the "Prince of demons" or Beelzebub.

How can the disciples who are sent out as sheep among wolves expect to fare any better? It's a sword out there. Just so you know.

Jesus understands that by sending the disciples out in this way that they may share in the same fate that awaits him in Jerusalem; that as they teach peace, and even heal the outcasts of society, they will likely meet resistance and ridicule. They will be harassed and slandered. Doing the right thing can often produce division, putting you at odds with those who are close to you and do not see things the same way.

When you live the way Jesus taught, with radical hospitality to strangers, amazing love shown to enemies or compassion and mercy shown to the sick and the poor, then you are going to offend people who have a vested interest in keeping the oppressed oppressed and the poor poor.

The sword that Jesus is talking about then is not a weapon of war, nor is it something to be wielded by the disciples.

Jesus does not say “pick up the sword” but rather, “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” The power of God is not found in the sword but in the cross.

So when Jesus said he came not to bring peace but a sword, it was his way of reminding his followers that if they were serious, they must embrace the probability of opposition, and they must accept the possibility of death.

Because when you pick up a cross, you are, as Bonhoeffer has suggested, picking up the instrument of your own death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a leader of what was known as the “Confessing Church” as opposed to the churches who supported Hitler calling themselves the “Reich Church”. Bonhoeffer was arrested during W.W. II, put in prison, then a concentration camp where he was shot a few days before the Russians liberated the camp.

What we do not see in this text, but what we know from Scripture is that when we do this, as Saint Francis notes in the prayer attributed to him, positive and good things happen: “In dying, we receive eternal life.”

May the peace of God . . .

#713 – O God of Every Nation