
It's Hard – Do It Anyway

Matthew 10:24-29

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, June 25, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

Sometimes I don't like the Bible. I love the truth of the Bible. I appreciate its poetry and wisdom. I read it and encourage others to do the same. And yet, sometimes I don't like it. This morning is one of those times.

Our gospel text for today tells us that if we follow Jesus, we'll end up hurt. Suffering is part of the package.

I don't know about you, but I am not fond of pain. I don't look for it, and try to protect myself against it. Avoidance seems to me to be a wonderful strategy when it comes to pain, suffering or persecution. Our text for today does not encourage us to seek out pain or suffering, it simply claims that it is an expected result of following Jesus of Nazareth. Ouch. I really would rather read about the Good Shepherd, the promise of abundance life, or the gifts of faith, hope and love.

While I don't like the idea of suffering for the cause of Christ, there is another reason I would prefer to ignore this passage from Matthew. It's guilt. You see, I haven't really suffered as a result of my faith. Some of you have, but if I were graded on spiritual performance with this passage in mind, I would be in trouble.

We are in a university community, so imagine we create a grading scale for persecution and suffering.

- Martyrs would get an A+, right? I am not a perfectionist, so I am OK with not getting an A+. Some of the earliest Christians were martyred; on Palm Sunday this year Coptic Christians in Egypt were murdered in their churches.¹ Martyrdom is a reality; I confess, I have no desire for it to be mine.
- Persecution would earn the grade of an A. This would include beating or imprisonment because of the faith. The Apostle Paul endured this. In our time, the Pew Research Center has found that 40% of countries worldwide have high levels of religious restrictions or hostilities; that number is for all faiths.² Christians face widespread harassment, in part because there are a large number of us. In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo controversy, rioting in Niger resulted churches burned and many injured.³ I have never been harassed or injured because of my faith.
- In a grading scale, suffering caused by division in the family, might earn a B. When loyalty to Jesus supersedes loyalty to family, it can seem as if a sword has cut the family in two. Years ago, I baptized a young woman who had been raised in the Jewish faith. Her parents had declared that they could not support her conversion to Christianity and that if

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/opinion/the-palm-sunday-attack-in-egypt.html>

² Pew Research Center: <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/11/global-restrictions-on-religion-rise-modestly-in-2015-reversing-downward-trend/>

³ BBC news: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30888188>

she was baptized, there would be a rift in the family. She chose to follow Jesus, despite the division it would cause. I baptized her with tears in my eyes, helping to create that division. I have never had to face the type of decision she did.

- Maybe we would grant a grade of a “C” for some discomfort or inconvenience in following Jesus. Maybe I could get a mercy “C”. I do have to work on weekends, after all.
- A “D” should probably go to all those who have felt no impact as a result of their faith.
- And a failing grade would go to anyone who actively profits from the faith. Since this year is the 500th year anniversary of Martin Luther’s 95 theses, we can remember that selling indulgences was less than admirable.

Where would you stand on this grading scale? Would you join me in hoping for a mercy “C”? Personally, I think this is a time to celebrate the wonders of grade inflation. If we move the scale up a bit, and compress the scale from 50 to 100, to 90-100, then we could all be A students. Maybe then this teaching from Jesus would not be so unpleasant.

Is there is another way to approach this passage? Perhaps we can think of it as a challenge. Jesus said that “A disciple is not above the teacher” and “it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher.” (Matt 10:24-25) They are to follow in his footsteps with consequences to match. Three times the apostles are told not to be afraid. Don’t be afraid of those who say you are of the devil, nor of those who can cause physical injuries. Don’t be afraid, because God values you dearly. Of course, we see what is implied: the apostles will be hurt physically and emotionally. And yet, Jesus affirms God’s care for them and sends them out.

We, human beings, have the capacity to rise to a challenge; sometimes we even thrive on challenge. Last week, our guest preacher, Dr. Paul Scott Wilson briefly referenced someone who climbed El Capitan, an impressive mountain in Yosemite National Park. The 3,000-foot granite wall has been a favorite for climbers for years. Most people use ropes and equipment to aid them in their ascent; some people use gear only to protect them from a fall. Earlier this month, Alex Honnold was the first person to ever “free solo” El Capitan. That means he climbed without ropes or harnesses, without protection from a fall. He used just his hands and feet; he had no room for error. His preparation for the climb, which took two years, included exercises such as hanging from the tips his fingers for an hour.⁴ Alex Honnold literally rose to the challenge.

The challenges that you have taken on are also impressive. A number of you have run marathons, learned a second or third language, written multiple books, or created large, beautiful sculptures. The trails we willingly face, including the ones we intentionally create, can take a variety of forms.

While individuals dare to take on great achievements and meet the demands head on, as Christians, we don’t need to look for nor create challenge. Jesus tells us that if we follow him, it is going to be tough -- potentially very tough.

The tasks to which Jesus calls his disciples are enumerated in the gospel of Matthew, just prior to what Leisa read for us earlier. Jesus sent the disciples out to proclaim the kingdom of God, heal the

⁴ National Geographic, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/features/athletes/alex-honnold/most-dangerous-free-solo-climb-yosemite-national-park-el-capitan/>

sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons. They are to travel from village to village, staying only as long as they are welcome, and are explicitly told they are not to profit from this work. Notice that the disciples are not forcing their views upon anyone, nor hammering their convictions into unwilling converts. They travel without possessions or gimmicks, expecting nothing in return for what they offer. They are to go to declare God's kingdom and work for the life and health of others.

What is it about this charge that causes so many problems? They are servants, working for the good of others? Why all the fuss?

It could be that whenever they spoke of the kingdom of God, the disciples began with repentance. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt 4:17) Their starting point was an acknowledgement that all is not right with the world or with any one of us. It is not a flattering place to start. They went on to proclaim that the kingdom was for the poor in spirit and that the meek would inherit the earth. It could be that when the apostles went out to heal, they named the sickness, such as patterns of anger and retaliation that are embedded in our lives and culture. They may have quoted Jesus in saying "You have heard that it was said..., 'You shall not murder';' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (Matt 5:22-23). And later, "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." (Matt 5:38-39) Perhaps these teachings hit too close to home.

The exorcisms the disciples did may not have gone so smoothly. The demon of hypocrisy can be profoundly entrenched. Perhaps there were those who did not want to hear a call to pray in secret and were offended that someone would think that their dramatic prayers were filled with empty, showy phrases. (Matt 6:5) And while the apostles knew that material goods could never be life-giving, their audience may not have appreciated the counsel that they should not store up treasures for themselves on earth, but instead store treasure in heaven. (Matt 6:19-20)

In short, the disciples were sent out to declare that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. They proclaimed that the kingdom of God, which Jesus ushered into this world, turning world upside down and inside out. It is not a surprise that this message was not always well received. Particularly by those in power. Particularly by those who could do bodily harm.

We, like those first twelve, are disciples. We, too, are sent out into the world with the same teachings in our hearts and the same command to work for the life and health of others. And further, we are not to be shy about this. "Proclaim [it] from the housetops", Jesus says. (Matt 10:27) This is not the same thing as being belligerent or obnoxious; remember the first disciples were told to allow people to say "no". If they were not welcome, they moved on. Nonetheless, disciples, then as now, are sent out to live faith publically, boldly, fearlessly.

We, here in Duke Chapel, may be in a unique position to be able to heed this calling. While we gather each week in this beautiful gothic building, this is not "our church". Of course, we have affection for this building and many memories of significant events that have occurred within these walls, and yet, this building does not belong to the Sunday morning worshiping congregation. This building, this multi-purpose building, belongs to a secular university. There are advantages to this, such as when the chapel underwent a \$19.2 million restoration.⁵ Not once did we hear a sermon

⁵ <https://today.duke.edu/2016/05/chapelreopens>

before or during the restoration asking for donations to pay for the project. More importantly, because this building does not belong to us, it reminds us that we do not belong to the building. We gather here from all over the Triangle, but our life here is only a few hours a week. The majority of our Christian life is lived outside these walls; we are dispersed in the community. And some who worship with us rarely, if ever, step into the building. Our services are live-streamed on the internet and broadcast on the radio so that families in Michigan, Georgia, and Indonesia may join us. (By the way, in case you didn't know, there are cameras throughout the sanctuary. So if you want to look up periodically and smile, feel free.) Our extended community reminds us that we are sent from this place to live our faith in the public square. So wherever we find ourselves during the week, whether that we at home, at work, at school, or at play, that is exactly where we need to be living and proclaiming our faith, regardless of the consequences.

Michael Morell, the recently retired Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, describes in his recent book a change he made to the swearing in ceremony for the new officers. He insisted that the ceremony be moved from an ordinary classroom to the main lobby. In the lobby of the CIA headquarters there is a white marble memorial wall with 125 stars⁶ etched into the stone representing those who died in the course of their work. New stars are added as needed. Morell wanted new CIA officers to be sworn in while they gazed at the wall; he then told the incoming staff that they were “not about to join just any company, not just any government agency.”⁷ The point was vivid. The work they would do as officers was consuming, demanding, and potentially life-threatening.

As I read this, my mind immediately jumped to the church. What would it be like for us to take our baptismal, confirmation, and membership vows while facing a memorial wall? What would it be like to remember the martyred and persecuted Christians as we professed our faith? The goal is never martyrdom or persecution; our faith does not claim special reward for martyrs. And despite my earlier illustration, God is not in the business of grading us. Our goal is simply to follow Jesus. As we look at the cross of Christ, a singular memorial, can we accept the challenge to live our faith publically, fearlessly, boldly? Can we rise to that challenge even if it is costly?

I know it's hard. Do it anyway.

After all, it is only by losing our lives that we will find them.

Amen.

⁶ <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2017-featured-story-archive/30-years-of-remembrance.html>

⁷ Michael Morell, *The Great War of our Time*, chapter 14