

Greetings in the Lord! Perhaps you remember being told as you grew up that polite conversation always avoids the topics of politics and religion. After all, these nasty subjects can plunge an otherwise friendly chat into ruin. We see that playing out today more than ever before as regards politics, don't we? It's a war out there! But this morning I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about religion. It's more appropriate, it's more interesting, and it actually has eternal significance.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 10:34-42

Jesus said, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ A man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

³⁷ Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

⁴⁰ Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

Jesus said, "**Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword**" (v.34). We kind of like that, right? The Lord's going to kick butt, he's going to impose law and order on the lawless and orderless!

But can you imagine the disciples' surprise when they heard these words? After all, he'd just preached the Sermon on the Mount with words like, "**Blessed are the meek... Blessed are the PEACEMAKERS**"! (Matthew 5:3-12)

And remember the story of the Lord's birth, how the angels sang for the shepherds, **"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth PEACE to those on whom his favor rest" (Luke 2:14)?**

St. Paul didn't talk about Christians brandishing a sword. Indeed, he taught the opposite, one of his most memorable teachings was about the Fruit of the Spirit and how Christians should strive to nourish them, including the fruit of PEACE **(Galatians 5:22-23).**

So what did Jesus mean when he said he came to bring **"a sword"**? We know it was not the sword of judgment, for if he had not fulfilled his ministry on the Cross, shedding his blood for our sins and defeating death on the third day, if he'd come with the sword of judgment before this gracious work was done, none of us would have been saved.

So what did he mean when he said he came to bring **"a sword"**? St. Paul wrote in **Ephesians 6:17** that we should **"Take the helmet of salvation and the SWORD of the Spirit, which is the Word of God."**

When we talk about receiving God's grace for salvation, we point to his Word, the Bible, for we believe these words are the inspired words of his prophets and apostles who wrote and spoke for our edification, just as Paul taught his protégé, Timothy, that **"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2nd Timothy 3:16-17).**

We say the Word of God is efficacious, that is, it affects change in a person when they hear it. It's a miracle. When the Word of God is proclaimed the Holy Spirit moves among the people. He is alive and vibrant and dynamic; he's busy changing us, transforming us. This is the problem with not meeting for three or four months. We lose our mojo. We don't have the kick God promised his Word would give us when we meet as a community as he promised, that **"where two or three gather in my name, there am I among them" (Matthew 18:20).**

The Bible is the **"sword of the Spirit."** We read in Hebrews **"the Word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).** This is the sword which Jesus brought to us, that is

the Word of God which convicts our hearts of sin that we would repent and be saved.

God's Word is a sword in many ways. When we take it to the world, the spirit is cut to the quick when the Word of salvation is proclaimed to people who are dying in their shame and sorrow. Even among Christians the Word is a sword when one calls out a brother or sister for gossiping or lying or stealing or lusting or using the Lord's name in vain.

A sword is a brilliant analogy for God's Word. For example, is it not a sword when we use it to challenge the world's lust for money and power?

I've been with people in the hospital and in hospice when their hearts have been pierced by this sword. A man will tell me about how he wished he had spent more time with his children and his wife. A woman will tell me that if she knew what she knew now, she wouldn't have been as careless as she was in her relationships with men. God's Word reveals our truth. It cuts us open, and our hearts are exposed. And we are vulnerable, and finally, at last, we are receptive to the Lord's love and kindness. And we cry out, "**Abba, Father!**" (**Romans 8:15**) And the Lord reaches down, and he forgives us, and he makes us his children in the name of Jesus.

So Christ brought the sword, his Word, which convicts us of sin, and therefore our need for God's mercy, which Jesus himself poured down on us from the Cross.

But this same Word can tear families apart too. That's why the Lord warned us, "**A man's enemies will be the members of his own household**" (**v.36**).

And it rips at the fabric of the family of society too. For examples, freedom of expression is the First Amendment of the Constitution, and everyone believes in it, that is, until what I say or you say offends someone. For example, if I invited you to my home for breakfast after church, but I told you we were going to have green eggs and ham, you would probably tell me I'm a nut!

Which is to say, there are some rough patches in society when it comes to open, free dialogue. If, for example, I want to talk about how I believe Jesus is what he himself said he is, that he is the only way to God the Father, and no one comes to the Father except through him, and that all the other religions in the world are

paths into eternal darkness, somebody's definitely going to be offended. That's the Word of God as a sword.

Despite the supposed freedom we have in our country to speak our minds, if we break with the opinion of the majority on a matter, we're bound to find ourselves in a fight. The Word of God is a sword.

In this morning's Gospel, the Lord said, **"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:38-39).**

What does it mean to bear a cross? That's probably the most avoided question in all of Christendom! For if I know what it means, I'll be responsible for doing it!

But I'm going to tell you what it means, nonetheless. To bear the cross is for Christians to share what it means to be loved by Jesus with other people.

Perhaps you remember an outreach program years ago called, "friendship evangelism." It was a popular strategy for developing relationships to share the Gospel. There are other means and methods which have bubbled up over the years for outreach.

But I think outreach is simpler than any of these methods. For we give witness to the Living God in our hearts when we resist sin. We testify to the power of God's hand in our own lives when we pray for another person publicly. We bear our cross when we make a personal sacrifice of time, money, and energy to build up another family. We testify to God's glory when we visit a person in their home or in the hospital and open the door to our heart to them and love them. This is a cross, it is a sword, for we have been opened up by the **"sword of the Spirit"** to share our hearts with these other people for whom Christ died.

In our country you will not experience violent persecution for your faith. That will not be your cross, as it is for Christians in other countries such as in China, North Korea, and in other countries. But we can bear the cross of sacrifice by taking the time to pray for these brothers and sisters who are persecuted, and to pray for the souls of those people who stand condemned for persecuting the saints of God.

Before the Lord concludes this message, he gives us a word of encouragement. He said, **“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. ⁴²And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”**

These promises are for all Christians and for people who hear the Word of God from a Christian. The Lord is with you; he is with us all. For he is present in, with, and under his Word when it is received with water in Baptism; when it is eaten in Holy Communion; when it is prayed and studied; read and taught; shared, proclaimed, and when it is lived.

My friends, your ministry in the Word and Spirit of the Living God is greater than you might think. Who you are and what you do in this Word is NOT about you. It’s all about Jesus and his promises to redeem you and to recreate you in the image of God with his Word and to send you out with it to make a difference.

When we encourage another person with an experience we ourselves have had in the Lord, we breathe the breath of God into them as conduits of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, **“Thanks be to God, who always... uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life.... in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God” (2nd Corinthians 2:14-17).**

A few months ago, we thought we might lose Mike Beresford to cancer. All the signs were bad. But Mike never lost hope, for his heart was rooted in the Gospel of Jesus, and he never lost sight of his Lord’s love for him. He knew to whom he belonged and where he was going. When we met, he ministered to my spirit, to my heart. I was encouraged by his sense of confidence and peace.

But we prayed nonetheless for healing, giving witness to our faith in God’s Word, his promises. The Lord promises to hear our prayers, and we believe him. He promises to heal his saints, and we believe him. He promises to love us as his sons, heirs of his kingdom, and we believe him.

And Mike's prognosis now is that he is well. No more tests or doctor's appointments until August. Halleluiah! The doctor told him it's a miracle, and I believe it is.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the world scoffs at us. It tells us what we believe is a collection of fairytales, a bunch of fables which we cling to instead of facing the truth that someday we are going to die and return to the dust and that none of this really means anything.

My friends, this is our sword, the Word of God that has strengthened Mike Beresford, the Word of God that convicted us of our sins and then absolved us of every one of them, the Word of God that informs our minds and spirits of the truth, and strengthens to face the struggles of the day with confidence.

This week, my friends, let us cling to this Word, for therein is our hope and our strength.

This week, let us get to know this Word more deeply, for therein is the Spirit of the Living God.

And this week, let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.