

Sermon – Matthew 10:24-39
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“Secrets and Sparrows and Swords, Oh My”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I want to say that it's not my parents' fault. They tried to raise me right. And it's not your fault; you've tried to convert me to a higher truth. People have tried to help me see the light, but I stubbornly refuse, insisting on being who I am. I decided long ago not to live in secret. And so, in spite of everyone's best efforts, and in spite of the derision I have endured from my childhood until now, I remain what I am, what I believe God created me to be: a devoted, and devotedly foolish, fan of the Kansas City Royals. I just can't help myself, and I learned at an early age that it was no use pretending I was someone else, even if it tore at the fabric of family unity. So it was that, when my father would take me to old Milwaukee County Stadium to see the local favorites, the Brewers, I would be the odd-looking boy decked out head to toe in Royals' gear. Sometimes the heavily imbibing hometown Brewers' fan would heckle and hiss at me as I cheered on my beloved boys in baby blue. One of my favorite memories, however, is of a particular game when I was nine or ten. Dad and I had front-row seats on the first-base line; next to us were two men in their twenties, enjoying the day with great gusto. Annoyed with my persistent rooting, they discovered the only way to shut me up. Every time a vendor came by, peddling nachos or hot dogs or cotton candy, they'd buy something for me. After all, if I wouldn't be quiet about my fandom, perhaps I'd cheer less if my mouth were constantly filled with ballpark food. And that, finally, brought my father and I together; he must have saved fifty bucks that day!

2. No, being a fan of the Royals isn't easy; not in Wisconsin and not in Chicago. But it's a cakewalk compared with being a follower of Jesus Christ. This seems, of course, counterintuitive. Every year on Christmas, we recall the angels' song of peace on earth and goodwill among all people. And every December 26, we open up the newspaper and discover that such peace and goodwill have not come to pass. Wars rage and refugees cower; politicians bicker and violence proliferates. While it is easy to forget in a nation that continues to grapple with oppression done in the name of Christianity, there are many in this world who are still persecuted for their belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, a fact of which we are reminded by the Chaldean Christians who may soon be deported to Iraq and to the likely persecution that would await them. Although you and I face no such fears, still it is true that we live in a culture that would more often than not prefer that we stuff another handful of peanuts into our mouths and just keep quiet about the whole thing. How can such things be for those who worship the Prince of Peace? To quote the Willie Nelson song, "Whatever happened to peace on earth?"
3. While such a reality may come as a surprise to us, it is no surprise to Jesus. Jesus calls us today to be who we are and to live out in the open. And while this certainly means claiming each facet of our identities, more to the point is to boldly claim and proclaim our central identity as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. This, as Robert Farrar Capon reminds us, does not mean to "preach salvation for the successfully well-behaved, redemption for the triumphantly correct in doctrine, and pie in the sky for all the winners who think they can walk into the final judgment and flash passing report cards at Jesus." No, it means proclaiming that we, along with all of the ways of this world, don't have a hope in this world apart from Jesus Christ. For those who seek to find their life in this world will lose it, but those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake, those who take up the cross and follow, those who

- recognize that our relationships – even those most cherished – are subordinate to Jesus’ relationship to us, these will lose their lives but find new life in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
4. This is the life to which Paul calls us in the sixth chapter of Romans, new life that comes in the drowning waters of baptism; new life that emerges when the sword of which Jesus speaks cuts us from our old life that we may find new life with God. It is a life that we are called to live boldly, not hiding our lights under bushel baskets as secrets. And no, it’s not meant to be easy. If carrying the cross were easy, we wouldn’t call it “carrying the cross.” As we daily take up this cross, however, we remember the One who carried it first. We remember that although Jesus’ cross led to death, it also leads to resurrection, first for Christ our brother and now for you and me. We know that our faith can bring challenges and complications to our relationships, but we celebrate the grace of God that creates new relationships with one another, with Christ at the center.
 5. Following Jesus is not always easy; it’s rarely comfortable. But there is always comfort to be found in the midst of whatever challenges we endure for the sake of Christ. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet when one falls to the ground, is not God with them? If God lavishes such attention on the birds of the air, will not God also be with us? God, Jesus tells us, knows even the count of the hairs on our heads. And while I confess that this is not all that impressive if mine are the hairs in question, the point remains. God knows us, God loves us, and God will see us through. We live now to proclaim this truth, this gospel of death and resurrection, for the sake of all people, regardless of other identity markers, for they, too, are of greater value than the sparrow.
 6. In a commentary on this text from *The Christian Century*, Liddy Barlow tells of Kenneth Feinberg, the lawyer who chaired the September 11 Victim

Compensation Fund, which gave money to the families whose loved ones were killed in the 2001 terror attacks. The process was driven by formulae and discretion, taking into account the victims' age, dependents, life insurance, and their income and earning potential. Taking all of these into account, families were awarded as little as \$250,000 for a blue-collar worker, while the families of executives were awarded as much as \$7.1 million. Reflecting later on the experience, Feinberg stated, "As I met with the 9/11 families and wrestled with issues surrounding the value of lives lost, I began to question this basic premise of our legal system. Trained in the law, I had always accepted that no two lives were worth the same in financial terms. But now I found the law in conflict with my growing belief in the equality of all life." This, perhaps, is why following Jesus is so challenging, why he tears some of our relationships apart. After all, we value some people more highly than we do others, but this is not the way of our God. God counts the hairs of all people, whether the head on which these hairs grow is black, brown, or white, male or female. God knows each person, and each is a person for whom Christ has died. To understand this, we need to die. We need to die in baptism and be raised. We need our old, sinful ways of relating to others to come to an end, that we may see all people through the eyes of Jesus.

7. Picking up the cross isn't easy. Living life in the open isn't easy. It is simply the life to which we are called, the only life that is really life at all. It's uncomfortable, *but take comfort*. The One you worship knows you and loves you. The One you follow carried the cross first, and the heavy lifting is over and done with. Sin and death are defeated. You have been baptized, and you are made new. So be who you were made and saved to be, a sinner now forgiven and set free to preach Christ from the housetops. Be at peace wherever you are, whatever you endure. From you will the peace of Christ make its way into the world. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.