

**“Sheep Among Wolves”**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 7**  
**June 22, 2008**

Texts: Psalm 69:1-18 / Jeremiah 20:7-13 / Romans 5:15b-19 / Matthew 10:16-33

**Matthew 10:16-33**

**Persecution Will Come**

16 “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. 19 When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. 20 For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, 22 and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 23 When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

24 “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

**Have No Fear**

26 “So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Imagine the Coach just before the big game. The players are huddled in the locker-room and a hush falls on the team and coaches. The Head Coach stands and the players can sense the expectation...this will be a go-get'em speech for the ages...everyone can feel the electricity in the air. And, then, when all eyes are fixed on him, the coach begins.

“Fellas, I am sending you out there and you are going to get roughed up. You are going to get the stuffing beat out of you. The other team is going to beat you like

an old rug, like you've never been beaten before. They are going to whip you like a dog. And, then, in the second-half they are going to do it all over again." How well do you think that would go over with the players? How well with the fans?

But, that is exactly what Jesus is doing here with the disciples. He opens our passage with, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves..." Well, in a battle between sheep and wolves, the sheep always loses. The sheep will eventually be eaten up by the wolf. Sheep have absolutely no defense against a wolf. They are slower than a wolf. They are dumber than a wolf. They are softer than a wolf. They are weaker than a wolf. Wolves have speed, strength, sharp teeth, and cunning. There is no contest between sheep and wolves..... But, sheep have a shepherd.

There is a Gospel perspective that is vastly different from what many consider the American way. We are taught that it is our own ingenuity, our stick-to-it-iveness, our independence that makes us Americans. We can do it ourselves. We can come up with some fix when something goes wrong. We can and should pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

Well, that may be an American virtue, but it is not a Gospel virtue. The Gospel virtue is found solely in Jesus Christ. The Gospel perspective is that we can do nothing without Christ who strengthens me. The Gospel perspective says that nothing can be done without God. The Gospel perspective says that when I am weak, then Jesus is strong.

So, the first point we learn in Matthew's Gospel about the Kingdom of God, about spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is that we will have opposition. There will be those within and outside the Church who will oppose us throwing open these doors to all! "[Followers of Christ] must go prepared for opposition (vs. 17-18). It is bound to come. Disciples who are not being opposed from some quarter or other are in all probability not saying anything worth opposing (Green, p. 136)." We can expect opposition.

The second point comes earlier, at the very beginning of this passage. Verse 16 says, “Behold, I am sending you out...” I am sending you out! Fr. Joe preached on exactly this point last week. Notice, Jesus does not say, huddle together in your comfortable church, in your comfortable Bible study. These groups are important for our own growth and healing, but it does not end there. If we are only receiving God’s Word, gaining in His knowledge, caring for our own small group, then we are spiritual gluttons. We are called to cast broadly the seed of the Kingdom of God. All are called by God to be saved. All are to be offered salvation through Jesus Christ, We are a sent people. That has been so throughout all of the history of Salvation. What would have happened if, when Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldees, he had said, “No, I am sorry, Lord, but I am comfortable just where I am...bring the people to me...I’ll make my home comfortable and word of mouth will bring the children of Israel.” No, even Abraham was sent...and so it began.

So, we are a sent people, and we are to expect opposition, even though it is God Himself who sends us. And yet, Jesus says, in verse 19, “Do not be anxious.” Excuse me? You are going to send me out away from the comfort of my home and my church. My enemies are going to beat me, drag me into court, hate me, and altogether abuse me? And I’m not supposed to be anxious? Why is this so? Because, again Jesus says, verse 24, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.”

But, wait a minute, didn’t Jesus also say (John 10:11-15),

11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them... 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

How do you square this with Jesus sending us to the wolves? Well, because, again, we need to have a Gospel perspective. You see, Jesus has already laid down His life for the sheep...once for all...through His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus is not talking about our physical lives. He is talking about our

spiritual lives. Although He cares about our physical lives, it is not of utmost importance to Him. Our physical lives are but a shadow of our spiritual lives.

Again, Jesus says in our Gospel reading (Matthew 10:28), “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Of what good is the safety and nurture of our physical bodies, if our spiritual bodies are lost?

In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (11:6), the prophet sees a new future, a New Heavens and a New Earth, in which, “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.”

But, that is not now...that is at the End of Days, after the creation of the New Heavens and the New Earth. For now, we live in a world where wolves ravenously eat sheep, without any guilt. But Jesus says, “Do not be afraid...Do not be anxious...Fear not!”

But, why does Jesus send us out amongst the wolves? Is it to toughen us up? To make us real men and women? Well, we see the reason clearly in Luke’s Gospel, where Jesus uses a similar expression when addressing the seventy-two disciples that he sent out two-by-two. In Luke 10 (2-3), Jesus says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.”

And what is the harvest? The harvest is the ripening field of souls who are lost, who do not know Jesus Christ. He sends us out as sheep among wolves, for the sake of the Gospel. We are to be willing to undergo abuse for the Gospel.

Some of you may be saying, “But, I’m not an evangelist, I’m not a preacher like you, Fr. Greg.” That may be true. Not all are called to be evangelists. Not all are called to be preachers of God’s Word. But, all are called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. The great Anglican evangelist Michael Green has said,

Regarding ten of these Twelve [disciples], we do not know if they ever preached a sermon: we are simply not told. But they all went out on mission.

They were all witnesses. I know of no more effective way for a church to grow than for it to become a church full not of preachers, but of witnesses. God has no [silent] children (*The Message of Matthew*, 2000, p. 135).

But, in this venture, we are to be as “wise as serpents and gentle as doves.” We are to be wise and prudent as serpents. I know you all will be glad to hear that in no other way are we to imitate serpents. But, serpents are generally quiet. Except for a few species of snakes, they do not generally trumpet their existence or their presence. In this way they may be called humble, and so are we to be humble. Serpents can find openings even in the smallest of spaces. So we are to be trained to find even the smallest opening in a conversation to tell someone about Jesus, or in a person’s life to shine Christ’s love. “Let the Gospel be the offense, not you.” Generally, serpents avoid men. So, also, we should avoid worldly men when they are dead set on causing us harm. We should wriggle quietly away until a more prudent time comes.

But, tied to this wisdom of the serpent is the gentleness of the dove. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great nineteenth century English evangelist has said,

But then you are to add to this—which might otherwise degenerate into cunning—the innocence of the dove. The Greek for, “harmless,” is, “without horn.” The dove is without horn, hoof, fang, or other means of defense. You are to have positively no weapons! Like the dove, you are to be defenseless. It seems an amazing thing to set doves flying at eagles, and lambs at war with wolves, but this is what the Lord has done! This defenselessness, however, which looks like our weakness, is our real strength! Our being harmless appears to predict sure destruction, but it is to be the means of certain victory!

And why are we to risk life and limb? Risk persecution and ridicule. Well, first because Jesus says so. But, secondly, so that all may be embraced by His saving grace. So, that all may know that Christ and Christ alone is the key to abundant life now, and eternal life with God in the New Heavens and the New Earth. That is a family reunion we can all look to and hope for with bursting hearts.

Sheep among wolves...serpents and doves. This is the Gospel perspective.

*Amen.*

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