**Matthew 10:24-33** July 9, 2017

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*Matthew 10:24 [Jesus said,] “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!*

*26“So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. 27What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. 28Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. 30And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

*32“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. 33But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

A woman in her late 20’s whom we have known since she was a grade-schooler, was a member of a swing dance club in a certain city. One evening, when their group went out to a restaurant, she did what she always did, which was silently bow her head in prayer for her meal. She noticed a nice-looking man at her table who also prayed before he ate his meal. Interested, she commented about it. He answered, “Since I am a Christian, I always pray before my meals.” “So am I,” our friend replied. “I’m a Lutheran.” “So am I.” Then he began an explanation familiar to him and perhaps to a few of you, “Well, I belong to this Lutheran church that is way, way conservative, almost like a sect. You probably haven’t even heard of us.” She asked, “Are you a member of the Wisconsin Synod?” Surprised, he answered, “Actually, yes! I am!” “So am I!” A few weeks ago they were enjoying their honeymoon in Paris. Who cannot be happy for them?!

And I am so happy that both of them were willing to make their testimony to their Savior even at a meal in a non-religious—not anti-Christian, mind you—but a non-religious group. And I am so happy that the Lord used their bold testimony to him as a way of giving them a great blessing! If you are ever reluctant to pray for your meal in a public restaurant, remember Caitlin and Josh.

Does this not emphasize so much of what Jesus said in our reading? He tells us,

**Don’t Give In to Witness Intimidation!**

All, or nearly all of us, remember news back in May of a young child in Louisville who was killed by a stray bullet while eating cake at a kitchen table. How terribly sad! And you remember in the days after the event, you remember the police almost pleading for information about the shooting. They were met with silence. I don’t know if that ever changed, if they got information. Many in law enforcement have said that witness intimidation is becoming a greater and greater scourge on our justice system. Many, many people who have information are afraid to give the information for fear of what will eventually happen to them.

But I don’t think this is something new. I don’t think it is something new because human nature does not change. And I don’t think it is something new because in our reading Jesus talks about witness intimidation in his day. Jesus wasn’t talking about criminal cases. He was talking about witnesses who have information that can give people eternal life—he was talking about you—and how they are intimidated.

In our reading Jesus was speaking to his twelve closest disciples when he was about to send them out on their internship. Now maybe they were chomping at the bit like youngsters often are at the thought of new, exciting horizons: “Hey, we have been sent by Jesus, Jesus himself, the great teacher and miracle worker. People will listen to us! It will be glorious!” But Jesus predicts that even though they are witnesses with crucial information that can impart eternal life, the world will try to intimidate them into silence. Jesus said to the Twelve gathered around him, ***“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master… If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub [the prince of demons], how much more the members of his household!”***

Yes, some of the listeners to Jesus’ word—not his disciples, but some of the other people—did call him Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Yes, Jesus, who healed the sick and preached a message of repentance to salvation, this Jesus was called the prince of demons. It was how unbelievers tried to delegitimize Jesus. There was no discussion, no debate on the issue. Just shut him down. Don’t we have that phrase: to *demonize* someone? That is what Jesus’ opponents did to him.

It is what the unbelievers did and continue to do to Jesus’ witnesses. We students are not above our teacher Jesus. We servants of the Lord are not above our master. The world tried to shame and threaten Jesus into silence. The unbelieving world does the same to you.

Notice how a Christian who does not want to put a homosexual decoration on a wedding cake will be litigated into bankruptcy. Notice how a candidate in the recent presidential race in a public speech said that people with religious views opposing abortion need change their outdated religious views.

The world continues to fulfill Jesus’ prophecy: ***“If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!”*** How prophetic Jesus was! Not only for those Twelve, but for his church of all ages. Does not the world love demonize those who would speak God’s will? Does not the world hate to hear that it needs a Savior from sin?

Have you been intimidated?

I use this as only one of many potential examples: not to say you have to, but do you pray before you eat in a restaurant? And even if you do, are you ever reluctant to pray in a public place? I confess that sometimes the thought crosses my mind. Many of you overcome that moment of reluctance and pray because you want to honor your Savior before the world. Good for you! But do you always challenge the intimidation?

**I. Because This World Cannot Hurt Us**

Think about these words of Jesus: ***“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*** Now we have to be sure we understand that verse. In ***“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,”*** obviously Jesus is saying, “Don’t be intimidated by people. While they can make life miserable, they cannot harm your eternity.” Then Jesus says, ***“Be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*** Who is that? I remember thinking in younger years that Jesus meant the devil. But the devil cannot destroy your soul and body in hell, only God can. When you feel the witness intimidation, Jesus tells you, “Don’t think about people who would harm you or insult you. Think about God. He has much more power for your good or bad.”

Sometimes a threat is required to shock us back to our senses. When we are staring at a crowd of people who pressure us into conformity. Remember the big picture. The one we need to listen to is God, and the one we need to testify to is God. And so Jesus says, ***“Whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”*** Those times you are afraid to talk about your faith and want put distance between Jesus and yourself, those are sin. Those times you apologize for what the Almighty God has said and try to soft-sell his word, those are sin. Jesus says that disowning Jesus will lead him to disown you on the Day of Judgment. And if on that Day of Judgment, Jesus disowns us; if he should say to us, *“I never knew you”* (Matthew 7:25), we will indeed be in trouble.

Jesus, forgive us for the times we have been intimidated! Jesus, forgive us for the times we have tried to pretend we didn’t know you so that the pressure would let up. Jesus, forgive us.

And he has. He has forgiven us who do not deserve to be forgiven. He has bled and died, never grudging the sacrifice he had to make, even for people who are sometimes embarrassed by him. Oh, Lord, strengthen us to never be embarrassed by you, to never be intimidated by others, to pray as one of our hymns says so eloquently: (CW 486:5)

*Lord of glory, you have bought us With your lifeblood as the price,*

*Never grudging for the lost ones That tremendous sacrifice.*

*Give us faith to trust you boldly, Hope, to stay our souls on you…*

As surely as you would give a robber your wallet to save your life, give up your life to save your soul. The two are simply not of equal value. Disowning Jesus now can only bring greater loss later.

**II. Because God Will Bless Steadfastness**

But Jesus does not want us to primarily remember the threat of being disowned. He gives us a great encouragement to be God’s witnesses. He says, ***“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”*** (29-30).

When you have that split second to decide whether to be God’s witness, remember that God knows what you are going through at just that second. In the stress of the moment, when your entire mind and thinking are focused on the “threat” before you, and the human instinct is self-preservation, remember God your Father in heaven. He knows all that is in your life. He knows about the birds that show up at your birdfeeder every day. Even those drab sparrows. He knows the number of hairs on your head. Do not feel abandoned.

When faced with the intimidation of this world, whether it is to remain silent, or to go with the group into sin, or to change your mind because surely everyone can’t be wrong, or whatever, remember that your God knows your situation. He will strengthen you. He will bless you.

A few years ago, when I would wash my face in the sink in the morning, I would see some strands of hair in the sink. In the master bathroom of our former house we had only one sink. I assumed that those hairs were someone else’s. When we moved into a house with two sinks in the bathroom, I continued to see those strands. Just a little peeved, I kept wondering who was using my sink. Not that it really mattered, just a minor annoyance. It is surprising how long it took me to realize that those strands of short hair were actually mine! I must have really been in denial. Perhaps this doesn’t mean a lot if you are under 40 years of age, but you will get there!

Today’s reading can turn one of those annoyances of life into something meaningful. As I swish the water around to wash that hair down the drain, I can think, “Yes, even that hair, God knew about it. He had a number on it. He knows exactly how many I have left, and he knows what day each one will fall out. And so if God knows about and must allow each hair to fall out of my head, then I know that he knows all that I am going through. And he already knows all that I will go through as this day unfolds. He knows about the unpleasant parts, even the parts when it feels like I can gain something by not giving a full and truthful witness about my God, God knows it all. And he has promised that whatever it costs me to acknowledge him in this life, he will more than return in the life to come.”

And I can swish the water and wash each strand of hair down the drain, not in despair over hair loss, but with another reminder that Jesus gives us, ***“Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul… Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”*** How silly of me to look at the scowling faces of the world and to worry. God knows. God will bless, in great and wonderful ways we cannot expect—remember Caitlin and Josh! Even more, Jesus promises, ***“Whoever acknowledges me before me, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.”*** Amen.