

# **“Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth”**

**Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17 and Matthew 10:34-39**

**June 25, 2017 International Protestant Church of Zurich**

**Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Douglas J. Brouwer**

Chapter 10, in Matthew’s gospel, contains some miscellaneous sayings of Jesus, what looks like a random collection. But taken as whole, these are sayings about what life is going to be like for believers. And what Jesus seems to be saying to us is that the life of faith is not easy. It’s going to be a challenge. Faithful living is going to require strength and perseverance and persistence. Just because you’ve accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior doesn’t mean that suddenly everything is going to be much easier.

Let’s read these words together:

**<sup>34</sup> “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.**

**<sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,**

**and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;**

**<sup>36</sup> and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.**

**<sup>37</sup> Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Last week, as a few of you know, I was in the U.S. participating in a worship conference. I’ve been a member of the board that presents this conference (and many other things) for more than 16 years. And when you give 16 years of your life to something, chances are that you believe in it strongly, and I do.

It’s been one of the rare privileges of my life, in fact, to do this work.

Among other things, the worship institute gives away large sums of money – hundreds of thousands of dollars each year – to churches (primarily) that want renew their worship lives or make them more vital.

If you need a few thousand dollars to purchase electronic equipment, you won’t get a grant. On the other hand, if you want to introduce the Psalms to your congregation as a way to give your people language

to express grief and loss and disappointment in life and so forth, then we want to talk further with you. That's just one example. Big ideas, not equipment or hymnbooks.

Often, before I attend one of these events, I find that my morale is dragging. I sometimes feel despair or hopelessness about the church. I find myself saying, along with the prophet Elijah, "I and only I am left."

And then, when I attend as I did last week, I discover that the church has never been more alive. I meet women and men who are working with passion and energy and creativity and imagination to make their worship life rich and life-changing.

Speaking of worship, you can't have a worship conference without having amazing worship, and worship at these conferences is always the best I have ever experienced. I should tell you that grant recipients who attend the conference – they have to attend or they don't get the money! – the grant recipients include every imaginable worship tradition.

There are Catholics over on the liturgical side – including two of my colleagues, in fact, who are Catholic liturgical scholars – but there are also Baptists and Presbyterians and Mennonites and this year, for the first time, I think, an Orthodox priest.

By the way, it was at this conference a few years ago that I first met Jeff Powell, who was the interim pastor here before my arrival. Jeff's church in the U.S. had applied for a grant, and he was at the conference to pick up the grant money. I had no idea that our paths would cross again in Zurich, Switzerland.

The worship at these conferences is amazing, as I said, and I come away each year determined once again to aim for excellence and creativity and all the other elements I felt and observed.

Here's an interesting observation: I can't tell you what kind of worship it was. I come away each year, and I think, "Was that traditional?" And the answer is no, although there was an organ and a choir and music with actual notes.

So, was it contemporary? Again, the answer is no, although there were a couple of guitars and a drum set and screens where the music was projected and even a few singers up front who were holding microphones and leading us in the singing.

So, what was it? I can't say for sure. The word "blended" doesn't begin to do it justice. The truth is that our worship was a third category altogether that transcends our usual categories.

You know we have some fierce defenders of traditional worship here, and some equally-fierce defenders of contemporary worship, and what I have tried to say is that those aren't the only categories to choose from. Next year, maybe I can convince one or two of you to go with me and find out for yourselves what I mean.

In the meantime, I want you to know that the church is alive. The church is finding and developing new leadership. The church is not standing still and feeling sorry for itself; instead, the church continues to test the boundaries and try out new ideas.

The director of the institute, who seems to have more ideas before breakfast than most people do in a year, said to us that he's never met a box that he didn't try to think outside of. And trust me that that's an unusual statement from a liturgical scholar. We need more like him.

I was one of the speakers at the conference this year, and I'm pretty sure that's because my book about the multicultural church was published about two weeks ago.

There were two other speakers. One was a woman from Argentina who had just finished her Ph.D. in theology and who described herself as the product of the Presbyterian missionary movement to her country.

The other speaker was a native American who grew up on a reservation in the southwestern part of the United States. He too was the product of Christian mission, but his story was a sad one, I thought, because the missionaries made Native Americans choose between their tribal culture and Christianity. He has made it his life's work to speak with young people about embracing their identity as Native Americans, which can be thought of as a gift from God, just as you and I embrace the various cultures in which we were raised. It's possible, he said, to be proud Indians and followers of Christ.

And then it was my turn.

I'm not a second generation convert to the faith. And I don't have any American missionaries to thank or blame. But I had a story to tell, and I told it, and I cried at the end, which is not something I usually do when I speak in church, and it occurred to me that I should tell you this story also ... because it concerns you too.

Usually, when people preach a sermon, they explain a text and try to apply it to our lives. What I want to do today is to say something about how the biblical text explains me, how it has shaped and changed and transformed me.

This story is very personal – which is the reason I cried – but its more than that. I think that there are important biblical truths here. The assignment that I and the other speakers were given was to talk about our experience as an example of “**cruciform hope**” – in other words, how our lives are examples of the Jesus way, which of course is the way of the cross.

For nearly 35 years – and it astonishes me to say that number – I served congregations in the U.S. which were homogeneous and monocultural. And by that I mean that they were white – obviously and overwhelmingly white.

And frankly, I didn't fully appreciate this at the time, but it is relatively easy to lead a congregation when everyone looks alike, when everyone thinks alike (more or less), when everyone votes alike. There were no surprises in the churches I served. I knew what to expect from them, and they (usually) knew what to expect from me.

So, how would I describe life in a homogenous and monocultural congregation? Sameness, predictability, and lots of white people.

Three and a half years ago – I was apparently tired of the easy life I had – I accepted your call to become pastor of this church. No more sameness and predictability. More than 20 nationalities on any given Sunday morning.

In fact, three Sundays ago, on Pentecost, I was able to find – without trying very hard – 18 people with 18 different mother tongues to say, “**Come, Holy Spirit**” at the beginning of worship. And I apologize that I forgot the most frequently spoken language here – Swiss German. Thanks to Juerg Kessler for stepping up at the last moment. Make that 19 different mother tongues.

So, what do we have here at IPC but one of the most racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse congregations on the planet.

When I served my previous congregations back in the U.S., I think I was reasonably effective in my leadership. Most days I knew what I was doing. But all of that confidence and certainty evaporated when I arrived here three and a half years ago. I realized that much of what I knew and had taken for granted no longer applied here.

And so, in the time that remains, I want to offer three words – three words that are easy to remember – that describe what happened to me.

The first word is **humility**.

Just so you know, I was not searching for more humility in my life, but humility found me. One day I realized that I didn’t know as much as I thought I knew. Strategies and tactics that worked or served me well in other places were not always effective here.

I don’t want to over-dramatize this, but I don’t want to understate it either. This was painful and hard and discouraging, but – as anyone who has ever felt God’s grace and mercy will tell you – humility is the starting point of the Christian journey. God meets us in our brokenness and says, “**Give up? Good.**” For some reason, God waits for just that moment to step in and take control.

It’s not exactly like the first step in a 12-step program, but it’s similar. Only after we have exhausted ourselves in useless attempts at living can God step in and rescue us.

I wasn’t looking for humility at the age of 59, but that’s what I found. I should mention that trying to learn German at my age has had pretty much the same effect, but that’s another story.

The second word I want to use in this connection is **listening**.

No one suggested to me that I should begin to listen. Maybe it was my pastoral instinct. But whatever it was, I began to listen to you as I have never listened before.

The thing is, I thought I was pretty good listener when I arrived. I have had training in listening skills. I was proud of my listening abilities. And do you know something? God loves to hear people say how proud they are of something. I’m sure God smiled a little whenever I told myself what a goooood listener I was.

Listening is hard work. Listening in a multicultural context is even harder.

At Council meetings, early on, I found myself frustrated and irritated. I looked at the agenda and thought, “**Well, that should take an hour.**” And then the meetings sometimes lasted three hours ... or more.

My training tells me to move meetings along, to ask for a vote, and then to get to the next item on the agenda. But that’s not what we did, and it was excruciating for me. And then, after a few months, I began to recognize something ... we were listening to each other. We were trying our best to understand.

You know, when Jesus was walking along, I think it’s clear from the gospel account that he was an active listener. He took people seriously. He saw beyond the fact that they were lepers and Samaritans and tax collectors and women. And he saw the people he met *as people*, human beings, with stories to tell. They stopped being stereotypes and caricatures, and instead they were sons and daughters of God

Getting to that point – listening as Jesus listened – is not easy, in fact it’s terribly messy, but it’s necessary in a church like this.

And that leads me to my third word – which is **hospitality**.

The Greek word for hospitality, used through the New Testament, is *xenophilia* – love of stranger, love of foreigner, love of the Other.

It’s easy (or relatively easy) to love people who look like us and who share our cultural background and who share the same mother tongue, but hospitality as the Bible presents it says, “**No, no, no, that’s not hospitality.**” Hospitality, as the Bible presents it, calls us to love beyond the usual boundaries. The Bible calls us to love the unlovely, those with whom we don’t have much in common, those who are very different from us.

Xenophilia is the opposite of xenophobia – or the fear of strangers – and Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest has written that one of the movements of the spiritual life is from hostility to hospitality, from xenophobia to xenophilia.

And just in case you think this hospitality topic is not all that important or not exactly central to the Christian life, I want to point you toward Matthew 25 and the story there about the last judgment.

How does the King in the story – God! – judge between the sheep and the goats? How is the final judgment going to be decided? How do we know who gets in and who doesn’t? The deciding factor is hospitality. “**I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.**”

If you’re still in doubt about how important this is, go back and read those verses.

I think that one way to understand hospitality – beyond the food and water – is to think once again about the other person’s humanity. When we approach each other in humility (to circle back to the first word), we are acknowledging – think about this! – that maybe there is something this other person, this stranger, can teach me.

This is going to be difficult for us, as it was for me, because the tendency is to think I have nothing whatsoever to learn from you.

And the truth is, I could not be more wrong.

Here I am – a seasoned pastor, lots of experience, closing in on 40 years of experience, even a pastor at times to other pastors – and I am still learning ... I have spent the last three and a half years of my life learning as I have never learned before ... about what it means to be the church, what ministry is, and what God wants for us here at IPC.

I am learning from you. And I thank you. My hope is that you are still learning as well.