

Primary Reading: Matthew 10:24-39

A few months ago, I heard an interview with a man who is a war reporter. While investigating the war in Darfur, he'd recently been captured, imprisoned, and even interrogated for about five weeks in the Sudan.

As the interview drew to a close, the journalist said he sometimes joked that he doesn't really consider himself a "war reporter," he considers himself a "love reporter." He just "looks for love in all the wrong places."

But he went on, "There are wonderful stories about human survival about grit about bravery about love that you find on a battle field. And in a sense...that's actually the easy...way to find it because it's so black and white... When you're surrounded by so much darkness, when people behave well it shines like a beam of white light. *It's a little more difficult to do in ordinary life. And that's maybe where the real challenge is. Maybe I'm copping to go to the easy route where the contrasts are greater.*"¹

For some reason, I couldn't shake loose from the cobweb of my mind the journalist's description of his work being "the easy route." I was taken back that someone would say their job of writing in a war zone – one that constantly put his life at risk – was relatively easy when compared with, say, a journalist at *The Custer County Chronicle* because its *more difficult* to see the mountain-top stories and events in the landscape of ordinary life.

And for some reason, this interview shook loose from the cobweb of my mind when confronted with the gospel reading for the week. Maybe it was the surprising words Jesus uses as he commissions and equips his disciples, "Don't think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I've not come to bring peace, but a sword." ...sounding more like a war reporter and less like a love reporter.

¹ The journalist's name was Paul Salopek (interviewed on *Fresh Air from WHYY*, aired on April 10, 2008).

Or maybe it was the stark contrast between Jesus' comments about the sword and his earlier sentiment: *don't fear... even the hairs of your head are all counted... don't be afraid... you're of more value than many sparrows...*

Or maybe the readings just reminded me of the ordinary landscape of life. Sure there's some good lines, but nothing much in the gospel reading for today's really clung to the cobweb mind of the collective church.

You know, how some stories in the bible get a title that immediately calls it to mind. Like, "The Beatitudes" or "The Parable of the Mustard Seed" or even "Jesus Prays in Gethsemane." When you hear the title, you say, "Oh yeah, that story."

This week's reading, later editors decided, would be best to call by names like: "Coming Persecutions," "Whom to Fear," and "Not Peace, But a Sword." Not as memorable of a title... I was actually thinking – with the long list of family members Jesus says he's come to set against one another – about re-naming the Gospel Reading for today with the title of a recent movie: *There Will Be Blood*.

It's not exactly the teachings of Jesus we immediately turn to if or when we open the bible. I don't know about you, but if I'm looking to hear Jesus say something about peace or swords, I'd probably go about sixteen chapters later in Matthew where Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane and when his disciples wake up to the sounds of soldiers arriving with drawn swords, Jesus tells them: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Or, I'd probably go with the crowds up the mountain top about five chapters earlier in Matthew – where Jesus starts his ministry with a sermon that proclaims, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

The landscape of Jesus' preaching and teaching – it's no ordinary, flat landscape. Then again, neither are the lives we live. In the landscape of Jesus' preaching and teaching there are stark contrasts and even seeming contradictions. Then again, so too are the lives we live.

"I've come to set a man against his father," says Jesus. "...and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." When folks

talk about “Christian Family Values” – they don’t usually bring up these words exactly.

It’d be nice to have a tidy, little explanation of Jesus’ words and his meaning for our lives today. But Jesus doesn’t usually fit into boxes like this. He’s a little more slippery – like a fish you try to grab onto, but shoots out of your fingers back into the deep.

If we learn anything today, maybe we learn that the Prince of Peace (as we sometimes call him) doesn’t avoid or ignore conflict like some of us do. But it’s a good reminder too that when the swords get pulled in Gethsemane, he has a different way... The way of the cross. And he reminds us today, without mincing words, that unless we pick-up the way of the cross and follow Jesus, we’re not worth a thing – dead or alive.

Maybe like the war reporter who’s actually a love reporter, Jesus is willing to risk his own life in his pursuit of spreading the good news – looking for love in all the wrong places... all the places we’d least likely look for them.

This discipleship thing is no easy thing.

You know, I was thinking about the sword and about this reading and I realized my first response to Jesus’ words were to try to cut them down to size.

When Jesus says, “those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it...” He probably isn’t talking to me. I mean, I gave up four years of my life to study at seminary, right? I’m sure he means other people who don’t know or haven’t read the bible like I have...

So went my thoughts. I picked up a sword and tried to chop down the words so they fit me and so I didn’t have to change at all.

But as I stuck with the readings this week... and as the readings stuck with me, they began to shake loose the cobwebs of my heart.

The call to discipleship we receive through the Word of God is not to pick up a sword and start swinging it at anything we see that moves, cutting apart anything that's different from us.

It's not we who are called as disciples to judge the words, but the Word that cuts to the very core of our hearts.

Have I held on to my life with a grasp so hard that the very life I tried to protect started to gasp for breath? You better believe it.

Have I grabbed and tried to hold onto – tried to control relationships with the same kind of grasp, especially when I felt control of them slipping through my very fingers? Only to find that when I truly let go of the illusion of control, I discover a new life to the relationship? Absolutely.

I could be wrong, but I don't think our reading for today is about swords or violence at all. It's about Jesus sending his disciples out to a world that's desperate to hear a message of love...

We are so desperate to hear the good news that when we hear it, we'd rather cut it down with a sword to fit our illusions of control than allow it to cut us down...

And, of course, when we are cut down by the Word of God, we realize it was God who first put us together and God who continues to put us back together – mending broken relationships and sewing the seeds of love in the midst of hatred.

And so, let us all renew our call to be war reporters – proclaiming the good news in a world desperate to hear the message of love... and yes, even peace. **Amen.**