

*God of prophets and teachers, help us to hear your word and to proclaim it fearlessly to the world, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well. Today's Gospel lesson would have been a bummer of a text for last week, on Father's Day. Jesus says that whoever loves father or mother more than him is not worthy of him.

Tough words, Jesus!

Good thing we get it this week, instead.

Of course, this is a difficult passage no matter which week we read it.

I visited one of my go-to online worship planning sites in preparation for this morning's service. The website has been live for at least six years, which is twice through the 3-year lectionary cycle that we and many other Christian denominations follow.

For this Sunday in the lectionary – the third Sunday after Pentecost in year A, which is the year of the Gospel of Matthew – for this Sunday, there is nothing on that site.

In all those years, twice through the lectionary, not a single contributor to the website has been inspired to post something there. No one has written a prayer or a call to worship or anything else they thought worthy of sharing.

These are difficult texts today.

But these verses are still part of our Scripture, the book that we consider to be divinely inspired by God. So we can't just ignore them. We need to take the Word of God seriously, even when it means grappling with it, and maybe even getting a little offended sometimes.

One helpful thing to do when a Bible passage seems troublesome is to look at its broader context. Who was Jesus speaking to? In this case, Jesus is addressing the disciples. Just before today's reading, in the passage we heard last Sunday, Jesus sent the disciples out to do ministry in all the cities and villages. And he told them that they would not always be well-received.

This ministry gig is tough sometimes, and Jesus figured he'd better warn his followers before their first foray into it.

Many seminary students and candidates for ordination wish that they had received the same warning.

Jeremiah goes in-depth on this topic, in today's first reading, as he complains about how difficult it is to preach the word of God, and how many people ridicule him for it.

*For whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"  
For the word of the LORD has become for me  
a reproach and derision all day long.  
O LORD, you have enticed me,  
and I was enticed.*

So, like Jeremiah, the disciples have been commissioned to preach and prophesy on God's behalf. They have been warned that the road will not be easy. They might even feel enticed into the ministry they're beginning.

But then Jesus takes it easy on them for a few sentences.

He assures the disciples that they are valuable to God, and that God loves them so much that even all the hairs on their heads are numbered!

The ministry they're doing is important to God, and so are they!

But the affirmation is short-lived. Jesus goes back almost immediately to reiterating the message that this is not going to be an easy gig.

When you faithfully follow the Gospel, even those people who you thought loved you unconditionally might turn against you.

Being a disciple of Jesus can turn parent against child. That is a powerful and frightening image, especially considering that we often use parent-child imagery to describe our own relationship with God!

It's icky imagery, but most of us have probably experienced this, right? There was some time in our lives when we were doing what we thought was right, but we ended up estranged from our loved ones, if only temporarily, because they didn't agree with whatever it was we were doing.

Even when the Word of God is convicting, even when it's harsh, it can still carry a note of truth.

So, if we know what it's like to have estranged loved ones because we disagreed about God's call, how can we possibly heal those relationships, if it happens that the calling of God is no longer separating us?

When a Bible passage continues to be unsettling, even once you've put it in context with what goes before and after, and even when you've compared it to other passages in the Bible, the next step to making sense of it is to look at the historical context.

For today's reading, everything we've heard from Matthew 10 seems tough – Jesus is sending the disciples to unfriendly listeners, to proclaim the good news, even if it will cost them dearly.

In the historical context, it's helpful to remember that the Gospel of Matthew was written well after the actual ministry of Jesus and his first followers.

Matthew was writing to followers of Jesus who weren't quite Jewish anymore, but the term "Christian" hadn't been coined yet, either. The people who were first reading these words and then going out into inhospitable towns had probably abandoned their families of origin in order to join the burgeoning Christian movement.

They were in religious and cultural limbo. They knew what they stood for, but the world didn't yet know what to do with them. The initial reaction for most people was to persecute them somehow – even to the extremes of stoning them or throwing them to the lions.

In an ancient society, family connections were the only things that could ensure your employment or housing or other measures of security. Taking a risk like the early Christians did, that might alienate your family, was a tremendously huge choice to make!

The earliest Christians were brave, willing to risk not only their families, but also their homes, their livelihoods, even their lives, in order to follow Jesus and to spread the Gospel throughout the world.

From that point of view, the harsh words of Jesus can almost be seen as comforting!

Instead of posing a threat that being a disciple will separate us from our families, Jesus is offering reassurance to the first Christians. *You've been rejected by your families? It's OK. I expected that. God still loves you, deeply.*

Here's the good news, folks. You're not alone in this suffering gig. Many faithful people have gone through it, from Jesus to Martin Luther King, Junior – from Peter and Paul to and Bonhoeffer and Mother Teresa.

Society may reject your witness, and even your family may disown you, but when you choose to follow Jesus, you join a new family. You have parents and sisters and children in the church. You have security, not through your genetic connections, but through your community of faith.

This is a tremendous leap for many people, especially in a society that tends to idolize the importance of the family.

But Jesus is saying that faith is more important than family. The waters of baptism are stronger than the connections of bloodlines.

Remember that time when the mother and brother of Jesus showed up to speak to him, and he ignored them? He asked, who are my mother and brothers? The ones who do the will of my father in heaven.

When you follow Jesus, your relationships will be redefined.

When you follow Jesus, sometimes the things you took for granted will crumble beneath you.

And when you follow Jesus, you will never be alone. God will be by your side to protect you as the birds of the air and the lilies of the field are protected.

The hairs on your head are numbered – that’s how precious you are to God. The life and death of Jesus is the model for us as Christians. It is enough, we hear in Matthew, for the disciple to be like the teacher. So our calling is not only to follow Jesus, but to emulate him.

Jesus put the Word of God above all else, and he ended up with friends and followers, and he still had strong relationships with his mother and brothers. He may not have had a home or gainful employment during his time in active ministry, but I think we can all agree that he made a significant difference to the world even without these things!

Jesus was loved and blessed by God. And he was betrayed, punished, and executed by humans.

More than anything else, the words in today’s Gospel lesson describe what actually happened to Jesus during the course of his ministry. But despite the possible punishment and death, Jesus still calls us, his followers, to follow this example. We are called to preach the good news and minister to all kinds of people, even when it costs us our comfort or our relationships or our livelihoods.

When we choose to follow Jesus, we join the long history of people who have been persecuted, ridiculed, punished, and even executed for their faith. Today Jesus is being honest with us, and telling us that this discipleship thing may end up being harder than we think.

The good news at the end of the lesson, and at the end of the day, is that we are also promised life when we give up all we have to be disciples.

Those who find their life will lose it, Jesus says. And those who lose their life for his sake will find it.

Whatever it ends up costing you to follow Jesus, we are promised that the reward will be even better! The challenge is to listen, to respond, and not to be afraid when things become difficult.

Remember that God loves you dearly, even when it seems that the world doesn't.

And may the God who loves us and calls us into lives of discipleship also give us courage when things get difficult or the challenges seem insurmountable.

Amen.