

## **Matthew 10:24-39**

**GOD OF STRENGTH & COURAGE, IN JESUS CHRIST YOU SET US FREE FROM SIN AND DEATH AND CALL US TO THE RISK OF FAITH & SERVICE. GIVE US GRACE TO FOLLOW HIM WHO GAVE HIMSELF FOR OTHERS, THAT, BY OUR SERVICE, WE MAY FIND THE LIFE HE CAME TO BRING. AMEN.**

**A PROFESSOR RECALLS A SEMINAR HE TAUGHT AT PRINCETON SEMINARY. THE DOZEN STUDENTS SAT IN A CIRCLE. THE PROFESSOR KNEW MOST OF THEM, BUT THERE WAS ONE HE BARELY RECOGNIZED—A MAN FROM NORTH KOREA WHO APPEARED TO BE IN HIS LATE 60'S. AS THEY WENT AROUND THE CIRCLE SHARING THEIR NAMES AND A BIT OF THEIR IDENTITIES, THIS MAN HAD LITTLE TO SAY. HIS ENGLISH WAS HALTING AND HE SEEMED SHY, SO THE OTHERS DID NOT PUSH HIM FOR MORE INFORMATION. BUT OVER THE WEEKS, THE CLASS BEGAN TO DEVELOP A SENSE OF TRUST, SO ONE DAY THE PROFESSOR TURNED TO THE MAN AND SAID, "WE DON'T KNOW YOU VERY WELL. WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO TELL US SOMETHING OF YOUR STORY?"**

**THE MAN BEGAN TO OPEN UP. HE REVEALED HE HAD BEEN A PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT AT A SEMINARY. DUE TO HIS DEEP CONCERN FOR JUSTICE AS PROCLAIMED BY THE PROPHETS AND DEMONSTRATED IN THE LIFE OF JESUS, HE BECAME ACTIVE IN POLITICS. AS A RESULT OF HIS COMMITMENT TO BIBLICAL JUSTICE, WHICH WAS BEING TRAMPLED BY THE GOVERNMENT, HE WAS ARRESTED AND IMPRISONED. CUT OFF FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND CUT OFF FROM THE SEMINARY, HIS IMPRISONMENT BEGAN TO TAKE ITS TOLL ON HIM. HE SAID THAT AFTER MANY MONTHS, HE QUIT READING THE BIBLE. IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE HE QUIT PRAYING REGULARLY. HE FELL INTO DESPAIR AND HIS FAITH BECAME SHAKY. HIS JAILERS SENSED THAT HE HAD WEAKENED, SO, THEY ENTERED HIS CELL AND SAID, "WE'RE TAKING YOU BEFORE THE JUDGE. IF YOU RENOUNCE YOUR POLITICAL POSITIONS", WHICH WAS TANTAMOUNT TO RENOUNCING HIS FAITH---"THINGS WILL GO BETTER FOR YOU."**

**AS THE MAN SHARED HIS STORY WITH HIS CLASSMATES, HE SAID, "TO BE HONEST, I WAS READY TO DO IT. ON THE APPOINTED DAY, THEY TOOK ME INTO THE COURTROOM TO**

STAND BEFORE THE JUDGE. AS THEY BROUGHT ME THROUGH THE DOOR, I NOTICED MY WIFE AND A FEW MEMBERS OF OUR CHURCH WHO HAD SLIPPED INTO THE BACK OF THE COURTROOM. WHEN THE JUDGE GAVE ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO RECANT MY BELIEFS, BEFORE I COULD SAY A WORD, MY WIFE CRIED OUT, "GOD IS ALIVE!" THAT WAS ALL SHE SAID BEFORE THEY GRABBED HER AND DRAGGED HER OUT OF THE COURTROOM. BUT IT WAS ENOUGH. I STOOD FIRM IN MY FAITH."

IN OUR GOSPEL READING TODAY THE DISCIPLES HAVE BEEN TRAVELING WITH JESUS AS HE MOVED FROM TOWN TO VILLAGE TO COUNTRYSIDE, SHARING HIS SPIRITUAL WISDOM AND HEALING THOSE WHO SUFFERED. JESUS TAKES A PAUSE, AND SAYS, "NOW, IT'S YOUR TURN. FAN OUT AND SPREAD MY MESSAGE OF JUSTICE AND MERCY." JESUS COMMISSIONS HIS DISCIPLES TO CARRY OUT GOD'S WORK. THEY ARE RARING TO GO, BUT NOT WITHOUT A HEALTHY DOSE OF APPREHENSION. THEY DO NOT FEEL ADEQUATELY PREPARED AND THEY QUESTION HOW THEY WILL BE RECEIVED, SO JESUS GATHERS THEM FOR ONE LAST SESSION OF COACHING.

HE SEEKS TO INSPIRE THEM TO CARRY OUT THEIR WORK IN ALL FAITHFULNESS, BUT HE ALSO DELIVERS A DIRE WARNING. HE SAYS, "IF THEY HAVE CALLED THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE OF BEELZEBUL, HOW MUCH MORE WILL THEY MALIGN THOSE OF HIS HOUSEHOLD!" IN OTHER WORDS, "THERE ARE MANY OUT THERE WHO WILL NOT RECEIVE YOU FAVORABLY.

THE DISCIPLES HAD DISCOVERED MEANING, PURPOSE AND JOY IN FOLLOWING JESUS. THEIR LIVES HAD BEEN TRANSFORMED AND RENEWED. THEY HAD WITNESSED SUFFERING PEOPLE MADE WHOLE AND WATCHED DESPAIRING PEOPLE GIVEN HOPE. THEY KNEW IN THEIR SOULS THE PROFOUND POWER OF FOLLOWING JESUS.

BUT THERE WAS ANOTHER SIDE. THEY ALSO WITNESSED JESUS CONFRONT AUTHORITY FIGURES. THEY SAW HIM EXPOSE THOSE WHO BENEFITED FROM INJUSTICE. JESUS SOUGHT TO SPREAD GOD'S KINGDOM IN THE WORLD, BUT THOSE WHO PROFITED FROM THE CURRENT SYSTEM DID NOT WELCOME HIS ALTERNATIVE. JESUS REMINDED HIS FOLLOWERS THAT PERSECUTION IS INEVITABLE. "BUT," JESUS SAYS, "BE COURAGEOUS IN THE FACE OF

**OPPOSITION AND SPEAK THE TRUTH. DO NOT FEAR THOSE WHO KILL THE BODY BUT CANNOT KILL THE SOUL.”**

**JESUS WAS HONEST WITH HIS DISCIPLES. FOLLOWING HIS WAY OF TRUTH AND DEMANDING FAIR TREATMENT FOR ALL CAN LAND YOU IN TROUBLE. “YOU ARE BOUND TO ENCOUNTER OPPOSITION AND PERHAPS PERSECUTION. THOSE IN POWER MAY BE CAPABLE OF DESTROYING YOUR PHYSICAL BODY, BUT THEY CANNOT EXTINGUISH YOUR SPIRIT. THERE IS AN EVERLASTING REWARD FOR THOSE WHO REMAIN FAITHFUL.”**

**WHY DOES JESUS REQUIRE SO MUCH? BECAUSE HE GAVE SO MUCH. FOLLOWING CHRIST CAN MAKE YOUR LIFE OVERFLOWING AND FULFILLING, BUT REMAINING FAITHFUL IN THE FACE OF HOSTILITY REQUIRES A FEARLESS SPIRIT. IF YOU TAKE YOUR TASK SERIOUSLY TO CARE FOR GOD’S CREATION, YOU WILL MEET OPPOSITION. IF YOU RAISE CONCERNS ABOUT INCOME INEQUALITY, THOSE WHO PROFIT FROM THE CURRENT SYSTEM WILL NOT TAKE KINDLY TO YOUR CAUSE. JESUS CALLS US TO STAND FOR WHAT IS RIGHT AND TRUE AND JUST. SOMETIMES THAT’S NOT DIFFICULT; OTHER TIMES IT REQUIRES FEARLESS DETERMINATION. THINK ABOUT ALL THE MISSIONARIES AROUND THE WORLD WHO RISK THEIR VERY LIVES.**

**COURAGE DOES NOT COME EASILY. ALL OF US CAN NAME THINGS THAT FRIGHTEN US: FACING A REGIMEN OF CANCER TREATMENT, CONFRONTING A LOVED ONE SUFFERING FROM ADDICTION, RECEIVING A PHONE CALL AT 2:00 AM, JUST TO NAME A FEW THINGS. IT REQUIRES FIERCE DETERMINATION TO FACE THE DANGERS THAT HEIGHTEN OUR ANXIETY AND SPAWN FEELINGS OF PANIC.**

**I USED TO THINK PEOPLE WHO WERE BRAVE HAD NO FEAR. BUT HAVE SINCE REALIZED THAT COURAGE IS THE STRENGTH YOU SUMMON IN THE FACE OF FEAR. EDDIE RICKENBACKER, THE DAUNTLESS FIGHTER PILOT OF WORLD WAR I SAID, “COURAGE IS DOING WHAT YOU’RE AFRAID TO DO. THERE CAN BE NO COURAGE UNLESS YOU ARE SACRED.” WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU HAD TO MUSTER UP A HEALTHY DOSE OF COURAGE?**

**THAT’S THE CHALLENGE JESUS PLACED ON HIS DISCIPLES. DESPITE FEARS AND THREATS, THEY WERE TO CARRY OUT THEIR MISSION COME WHAT MAY.**

I DON'T THINK ANY OF US CAN BEGIN TO FATHOM THE BARRIERS THOSE FIRST DISCIPLES FACED. THEY WERE TO TELL THEIR FELLOW JEWS THAT THEIR RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAD MISLED THEM, THAT THE MESSIAH HAD COME, AND THAT THEY WERE TO EMBARK ON A NEW PATH. FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF JESUS, THEIR TASK BECAME EVEN MORE ARDUOUS. IT IS NO WONDER THAT JESUS WARNED THEM THAT BELIEVING IN HIM WOULD BECOME DIVISIVE. BECOMING A COMMITTED FOLLOWER OF CHRIST WAS THE BEST DECISION THEY COULD EVER MAKE. HOWEVER, AS JESUS EMPHASIZED: "DO NOT IMAGINE THAT MAKING SUCH A CHOICE COMES WITHOUT A COST. THOSE WHO FIND THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT, BUT THOSE WHO LOSE THEIR LIFE FOR MY SAKE WILL FIND IT."

JESUS CALLS FOR SELF-SACRIFICE, AND ULTIMATE COMMITMENT. TWO THINGS THAT COULD HARDLY BE MORE OUT OF SYNC WITH OUR CURRENT CULTURE, WHERE SELF-FOCUS IS THE NORM AND COMMITMENTS ARE RARE.

TODAY, MANY THINK THAT THEIR RELIGIOUS LIFE COMPRISES ONLY ONE SEGMENT OF THEIR LIVES. THEY HAVE A WORK LIFE, A FAMILY LIFE, A SOCIAL LIFE AND A RELIGIOUS LIFE. THEY WOULD BE UNNERVED TO DISCOVER THAT CHRIST NEVER ENVISIONED PART-TIME DISCIPLESHIP. THERE IS NO DIVISION BETWEEN SACRED AND SECULAR. NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUNDAY WORSHIP AND MONDAY MORNING OR THE REST OF THE WEEK. GOD EXPECTS US TO LIVE A CHRIST-CENTERED EXISTENCE AT WORK, AT PLAY, IN RELATIONSHIPS, AT HOME, IN OUR COMMUNITIES, AND WHEN WE MAKE DECISIONS. IF JESUS ONLY GAVE US GOALS THAT WERE EASILY ACHIEVABLE, OUR DEVOTION WOULD BE LUKE-WARM, BOREDOM WOULD SET IN. IF JESUS DID NOT MAKE EXTRAORDINARY DEMANDS, WE COULD NEVER ACCOMPLISH EXTRAORDINARY THINGS.

AT THE 2014 ACADEMY AWARDS, THE OSCAR FOR BEST DOCUMENTARY FEATURE FILM WENT TO *20 FEET FROM STARDOM*. THE MOVIE HONORED THE UNKNOWN MUSICIANS WHO SANG BACKUP VOCALS FOR ELVIS PRESLEY, TOM JONES, FRANK SINATRA, ARETHA FRANKLIN, BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, THE ROLLING STONES, U2, AND MANY OTHER STARS. MANY OF THE BACKUP SINGERS WERE BLACK WOMEN WHO GREW UP IN THE CHURCH. MANY OF THEM HAD FATHERS WHO WERE PASTORS...LIKE DARLENE LOVE. LOVE, WHO'S NOW 81, FEATURED

IN THE MOVIE, ACCEPTED THE OSCAR ON BEHALF OF THE FILM. SHE WASTED NO TIME IN HER ACCEPTANCE SPEECH TO HOLLYWOOD'S FINEST AND SAID: "LORD GOD, I PRAISE YOU, AND I AM SO HAPPY TO BE HERE. SHE THEN BURST INTO AN ENTHUSIASTIC RENDITION OF ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS GOSPEL HYMNS EVER: "I SING BECAUSE I'M HAPPY; I SING BECAUSE I'M FREE. HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW, AND I KNOW HE WATCHES ME.

THE AUDIENCE GAVE HER A STANDING OVATION. THOSE LYRICS COME FROM THE WORDS OF JESUS IN OUR GOSPEL STORY. IT WAS MADE FAMOUS BY ETHEL WATERS, WHO SANG IT AT BILLY GRAHAM CRUSADES AND USED IT FOR THE TITLE FOR HER FIRST AUTOBIOGRAPHY. ETHEL WATERS KNEW FEAR AND PAIN. HER BIRTH RESULTED FROM THE RAPE OF HER TEENAGE MOTHER. SHE GREW UP WITHOUT A FATHER IN SEVERE POVERTY. IN HER AUTOBIOGRAPHY, SHE WRITES THAT SHE NEVER LIVED IN THE SAME PLACE MORE THAN 15 MONTHS. "I NEVER WAS A CHILD. I NEVER WAS CUDDLED, OR LIKED, OR UNDERSTOOD BY MY FAMILY." SHE MARRIED WHEN SHE WAS 13, LEFT AN ABUSIVE MAN, THEN WORKED AS A MAID IN PHILADELPHIA FOR 75 CENTS A WEEK.

DESPITE ALL THAT, WALTERS TESTIFIED OF GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE: HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW, AND I KNOW HE WATCHES ME.

JESUS MAKES EXTRAORDINARY DEMANDS OF EACH OF US.....YET WE ARE NEVER ALONE. THINK BACK OVER YOUR LIFE.....ALL THE BLESSINGS, THE TRIALS, THE LOSSES, DISAPPOINTMENTS. AND WHO HAS BEEN THERE RIGHT BESIDE YOU EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY EXPERIENCE? EVERY MINUTE? NOT YOUR PARENTS/YOUR SPOUSE/YOUR CHILDREN/YOUR BEST FRIEND/.

I SING BECAUSE I'M HAPPY. I SEE BECAUSE I'M FREE. HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW AND I KNOW HE WATCHES ME.