

# Sermons at Oak Grove

22, 2008

June

*Genesis 21:8-21 & Matthew 6:24-34*

*“Embracing Our Future”*

*By Andries J. Coetzee*

## **New Testament Reading: Matthew 6:24-34**

<sup>24</sup>“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; <sup>25</sup>it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! <sup>26</sup>“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>27</sup>What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. <sup>28</sup>Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup>Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup>And even the hairs of your head are all counted. <sup>31</sup>So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. <sup>32</sup>“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; <sup>33</sup>but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. <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.

## **Sermon: “Embracing Our Future”**

Today’s lectionary offers us difficult choices, as we experience the reality of our scripture readings so vividly in today’s culture. This past week my passion for social justice resonated with the Genesis reading, a sacred text for Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Once again Ishmael, ancestor of the Arab people, was expelled by his father Abraham, with God seemingly endorsing what Sarah wants. Earlier this week aides to presidential candidate Barak

Obama kept two Muslim women from sitting behind the podium during his rally in Detroit because they wore head scarves. Later in the week the presidential candidate did apologize to them, but the fact of the matter is, that we live in a culture with an extreme level of Islamophobia with some people viewing Muslim supporters as a potential liability. What further distressed me is that Jesus came along saying; “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34).

But, I decided against controversy as today is a celebration for our congregation as our Nominating Committee will present us with a slate of women and men who will serve on the Pastor Nominating Committee to seek a new pastor for Oak Grove. This is the moment so many of us have been waiting for! Also, today we will gather and talk about the future of our Congregation and how the results of the recent survey will help us in determining our next pastor. Therefore, I chose to preach from the Matthew text, but once again that same Jesus came along saying; “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34). .... What is it with this Jesus of Matthew, interrupting us as we gather to celebrate, to move on, and to embrace our future as a church?

But to be honest with you, I have long struggled with this Jesus. As a little boy I have always felt guilty as he says: “<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”. As a teenager this Jesus gave me the right to rebel against my parents and the establishment saying; “<sup>35</sup>I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...”

At first one might think that Jesus is encouraging us to draw our swords in our righteousness, to act on our first instincts, to treat one another in the ways we sometimes do.

Reading the Congregational survey one cannot help but to read between the lines and detect some underlying tension within our midst. In all honesty, after my first glance at the comments section of the survey, I had to put it down and reread it two days later. At first I had to get past the negativity, and then only I could see the positive, the willingness to look forward and embrace our future. I am thankful that the survey gave us all a chance to express ourselves, and made it possible for us to be honest with ourselves and one another. In my opinion it seems

that some of us are still struggling to let go of the past, with all its wonderful memories and also its moments of pain and disappointment. The problem is, looking back we all tend to romanticize the past and think “those days” were the best time ever. Living life in the past tends to alienate the newer members who were never part of that past; therefore they feel not part of the Oak Grove story and consequently not equal partners when it comes to the decision-making process.

For many, members and staff alike, the present can't live up to the past, to the good old days, and in reflection some have a “second-hand” church experience. To me a good example of this tension is when we first moved to Minnesota. I still remember that first winter after having moved from Houston, TX and having lived most of my life in a warmer climate. As the snow fell and the temperatures kept dropping, the natives kept telling me: “This is not cold; you should have been here in the older days. Now that was cold!” or “This is not a snowfall; you should have experienced the big Halloween blizzard of '91!” What people did, unknowingly was to nullify my experience, and made me feel like an outsider. The reality is, never mind how cold it was in the past, -20 is cold....and no matter how much snow fell in the past, the first big snowfall always is and always will be exciting, especially for a newcomer! We can rephrase these stories in a way that share the past and makes newcomers feel part of the community, without making them feel like outsiders.

Fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, now is the time for us to work through these issues, the good and the bad, to retell our stories in ways that include and embrace, and then together....discern our future. The reality is that unresolved or oppressed feelings and opinions are not good for anyone ... it leads to anger, apathy, and disillusion.

It is to people like us, just when we want to draw our swords, that Jesus says, “Put your **sword** back into its place; for all who take the **sword** will perish by the **sword**” (Matthew 26:47, 51, 52, 55). These words Jesus uttered on the night of his arrest when one of his followers drew a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's slave.

Anna Carter Florence<sup>[1]</sup> wrote that “the sword Jesus came to bring was never the sword of kings and rulers, as his disciples-

---

<sup>[1]</sup> Anna Carter Florence, 2008: “Preaching the Lesson”. Lectionar Homelitics, Inc. p36-37

then and now- eventually learn. The sword Jesus came to bring is one that pierces Mary's heart and Jesus' own side. It slices through falsehood and serves up righteousness. It exposes evil and flashes truth. It takes the shape of a cross and leaves scars for us to touch." She writes that "it always takes disciples a long time to get this. Their instinct-our instinct-is to reach for the sword, whenever trouble threatens."

Our preoccupation with the sword keeps us from seeing the cross, it keeps us from reading that one's foes will ultimately become members of one's own household (Matthew 10:36), that losing one's life is in fact finding it. It keeps us from seeing and living the new community that God is creating. In biblical times according to our scripture, the church was indeed a new community where those who were estranged from family, friends, and community, due to their faith, found a new family in Christ.

The message Jesus offers us today as followers is to choose between the familiar, the status quo ... **or** our future in God. To choose the familiar will ultimately lead to death and to choose the future ... will be costly. In Jesus's day the potential cost was family and friends, home and community. To follow Jesus was to break with a past, a heritage, and a tradition. "To be a Christian was to step out into the unknown territory, to do more, and be more, and become more than ever before" <sup>2[2]</sup>.

We as Oak Grove Presbyterian Church are called to be **that** community where there is no purity test, where years of membership and the amount you pledge does not translate in the amount of power you have. Where **all** people, young and old, single or partnered, rich and poor, black and white, gay and "so-called" straight ... people who are still excluded by our society, still estranged from their parents and family are welcome to join us in full participation of membership and leadership.

What keeps us from being that community is fear, our fear of the unknown, fear of the other and fear of letting go. It is to people like us that Jesus is saying that we do not have to be afraid. God cares even for the little sparrow, how much more does God care for each one of us. God's care does not mean that the sparrow won't fall to the ground, or that bad things won't happen to us,

---

<sup>2[2]</sup> Avis Clendenen, 2008: "Preaching the Lesson". Lectionar Homelitics, Inc. p36-37

but the comfort is that God knows and that God cares. This might be a simple statement, but for those in the midst of persecution, these were powerful words, and for us in the midst of transition and change, these are powerful words.

If you have not planned to stay for the Congregational Meeting later today I encourage you to do so. I also encourage you to participate in the discussion regarding the survey results and give your input to our Pastor Nominating Committee.

We all are part of this community, and for us to move forward all voices need to be heard and all images reflected in order for us to live as God's beloved, who have a future in God. AMEN

---