

GENESIS 22:1-14 (p. 16)

JUNE 28, 2020

MATTHEW 10:40-42 (p. 791)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, help us to understand what you are trying to teach us as we look at your hand in the lives of your people. Cause us to grasp your design for our lives, and your purpose in Creation. Open up our hearts to your truth. Enable us to discern your will. And empower us Lord, please, to implement these things into our daily walk. In Jesus' Name we ask this, Amen.

"A DANGEROUS FAITH"

I found a Long-sleeved T-shirt that I really liked. But it had a strange label on the inside of the collar. It said, "Shrink Resistant-Synthetic Material". I wasn't sure what that meant, so I asked the guy at the counter. He said, "It means that the shirt will shrink. But it doesn't really want to"!

It's crazy, isn't it, how many Warning Labels exist in our world today! They're almost everywhere! The coffee cups at McDonalds say, "Caution, Contents may be Hot"! I certainly hope so! The Peanut Butter in my cupboard says, "Contains Peanuts"! Again, I hope so! The Miniature Marshmallows I put in my Granddaughter's Hot Chocolate the other day said, "Choking Warning. Eat one at a time. Children should always be seated, and supervised, when eating"! I thought about scooping three or four out of her cup! What's next, Ice Cream Containers that say, "Keep frozen until use" or, "Refreeze after Opening"? I mean, do we really need all these warnings?

Vending Machines have big signs that say, “Do not shake or tip”. Apparently, if those monstrosities fall on you, you might get hurt. Clothes Dryers and Washing Machines have labels inside the doors, “Caution, This machine spins at High Speed. Do not let Children Play Inside”! If you are stuck home because of the Coronavirus, or simply bored, do a Google Search. It might just make you smile? My personal, all-time favorite was posted on the wall of a Church! “Warning, Articles of Value Should not be Left on Seats Whilst Receiving Holy Communion”! I wonder if that’s how they do the Offering?

There are Warning Labels everywhere! Even some that don’t seem all that sincere! Back in the days of Prohibition, for instance, they had a product called a “Wine Brick”. Now if you know what a Wine Brick is, you probably weren’t doing what you were supposed to do, so don’t raise your hand or anything. But if you don’t know, Wine Bricks came on the scene when Bottled Wine was outlawed. Bootleggers would press Grape Concentrate into the form of bricks, which wasn’t against the Law. But then, they would add a Warning Label that said; “Do not let this brick sit in a gallon of water for 21 days. It will Ferment and become Illegal Wine”!

So, here is my question. Do we need Warning Labels or not? And how do you decide when, and where? I mean, if I were going to write a Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, I would definitely include one at the beginning of Chapter Ten! “Caution—The Following Describes an Extremely Dangerous Faith”! Just listen to what’s inside! “He who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the One who sent me.”

Then Jesus goes on! “Whoever welcomes a Prophet, as a Prophet, will receive a Prophet’s reward! And whoever welcomes a righteous person, as a righteous person, will receive a righteous person’s reward!” That all sounds good and fine on the surface, right? But what about the flip side? If you don’t, you won’t! If you don’t welcome someone Jesus sent...! If you don’t welcome a Prophet...! If you don’t welcome a righteous person...! You will not receive the reward! Or, if you are not welcomed when you are sent by Jesus, when you are being Prophetic, or when you are being a righteous person, then those who reject you, will not receive the reward! Can you see why I think we should have been warned?

Prior to this “Cautionary Chapter”, the Lord has talked about the rewards of being a Faithful Follower; “The Kingdom of Heaven,” “Inheriting the Earth,” “Being Comforted,” “Filled,” “Shown Mercy,”! But now, as Jesus sends out Disciples, He starts talking about the demands involved, and the consequences! And this is the third week in a row that the Lection has brought us an excerpt from this Chapter!

We have already heard that we should expect trials and tribulations, that we will be handed over to the authorities, that brother will betray brother, even unto death! All that happens to us, though! But here, Jesus piles on a whole additional layer of responsibility! “Those who receive you, receive me”! In other words, if you are my Disciple, and folks welcome you, then they are in essence, welcoming me! But if they don’t, if they reject you, they are really rejecting me! And that adds considerable pressure to this Witnessing thing, doesn’t it?

What I do, and what I say—and how I do it, really matters to others? What you do, and what you say—and how you do it, really matters to others? Possibly, even in Eternal ways? This is serious, isn't it? Which is why I think we should have been Warned!

I have a fairly high opinion of the Church. I am supposed too, right, I'm a Pastor. Maybe not who we currently are, but certainly who the Lord created us to be! Scripture clearly tells us that we are the Body of Christ here on earth, in this particular time and place!

Only I've been around Churches all my life, and I can see that we're flawed! We make mistakes all the time, at least I do! All kinds of mistakes, really, sometimes one right after another! And yet, right here in the Word of God, as a part of our Marching Orders, in our Mission Directive, it says, "when the world receives us", "shows kindness to us", "gives dignity and respect to us", it is as if they are welcoming the Lord Himself! ...So, at the risk of sounding like a Therapist, how does that make you feel?

I personally find it more than a bit intimidating! I think it would far easier if Jesus had said, "I know you'll do your best to bring people to the Faith. But I also know you are human, and therefore, you will make mistakes. Don't take it personally, or even too seriously. Just do what you can, when you feel like it, and that will be good enough." But He didn't, did He? In fact, He says just the opposite. "Anyone who receives you receives me"! And that, at a minimum, should make us sit up and pay attention! And maybe reconsider absolutely everything we say and do!

There are going to be people who won't receive you. There will be some who do not want to hear what you have to say, no matter how eloquently you speak, or how much truth your words carry, or how "spot on" your arguments actually are! There are going to be folks who, no matter what you do, no matter how righteous you are, will simply not want you around! If you are one of my Disciples, says Jesus, there will be those who persecute you. In fact, they will haul you up in front of those in authority, and do their very best to get you into trouble! So, how do you feel now? And the reason I'm asking is, if those things aren't happening to you already, if you are not running into resistance in your day-to-day walk, are you really doing what Jesus has called you to do?

See! I told you! This is a Dangerous Faith! There ought to be some kind of Warning Label on every single Bible in the world! Someone should have told us ahead of time that this "Faith Thing" requires personal responsibility! What about a "Rating System" of some kind? You know, like they do on "edgy" movies! At least on certain parts of Scripture! "This Mission, should you choose to accept it, has been rated 'S' for Serious! There are scenes of Truth throughout! And of course, the resulting Consequences!"

I do think someone should have warned us! This is a huge aspect to our Faith, way too important to just walk into blindly! Clearly, being a Christian is not a spectator sport, as some might believe! We are required to get into the game and play our position, to do our part, to step up and step in! And there are serious consequences to all of this! Again, someone should have told us ahead of time! Only, isn't that exactly what Jesus is actually doing, here in Matthew Chapter Ten?

Our Lord is preparing His Disciples for their very first Mission Trip. He has gathered them together to hand out their assignments, and to tell them what they will need for the journey. He grants Authority to drive out evil spirits, and Power to heal every disease and sickness! He tells His followers that the plan is for them to Go and Preach that the Kingdom of Heaven is near! He says, Heal the Sick. Raise the Dead. Cleanse those who have Leprosy. And drive out demons! He then reminds us, that as Believers, we have freely received! So, now it's time to freely share!

It won't be easy, He says! Who knows how people will respond! It might even be downright dangerous! Not everyone is going to receive you with open arms! But go anyway! And remember, if they do receive you, I want you to let your Peace rest upon them! But if they don't, if they choose not to welcome you, to not listen to your words, to not receive you, then I want you to shake the dust off of your feet when you leave! It's serious!

And the biggest part of the Warning, the most frightening part for many in the Church today is; "I am not sending you out to the Gentiles, or to the Samaritans," says Jesus, "to those who do not believe at all, or those who worship differently". I'm sending you to the "Lost Sheep" of you own Faith. Go to those who have wandered away. Go to those who never really embraced the Faith. Go to those who aren't really following as closely as they should. ...So how do you feel now?

I warned you! This is serious stuff! This directive from the Lord means, going to our kids and grandkids, to our parents and siblings, our spouses, our neighbors, our co-workers and friends! It means reaching out to the folks who used to be in this Church, but now, for whatever reason, aren't in any Church anymore! This assignment includes honestly sharing with those who say they are Christian, but are not involved in a Community of Faith! It's going to those who say they Worship God in the Beauty of Nature, to those who don't read their Bibles, who don't Pray, who don't have a Personal Relationship with Jesus Christ—and saying, in a way that they can hear, that they actually need more! And that just made it real, didn't it? Not to mention dangerous!

This is Radical stuff! Radical Theology! A Theology of Sacrifice! One that Jesus modeled for us Himself! And then, just to make sure that those who have ears actually hear, Jesus goes on, in the very next Chapter, to talk about the sacrifice of John the Baptist! It's clear, explicit, and demanding, isn't it? Which brings up a clear, explicit, and demanding question! Are you currently facing persecution for your Faith? How about even a little "pushback", you know, every now and then? Are you and Jesus making waves in the world or not? And what does the answer to that really say?

There is a Church mentioned in Revelation, or a type of Church mentioned in Revelation, that is often portrayed as a model for today's Church. It's called the Church of Laodicea. Maybe you've heard of it? They had watered down the Faith so much, that now, they were just lukewarm—neither hot, nor cold. And Jesus warns them that He is about to spit them out of His mouth!

Do you think that's us, here in the United States? Are we guilty of watering down our Faith in order to make it more palatable and easier to swallow? Are we simply lukewarm? Do we preach only a Prosperity Gospel, one about rewards—or only a Social Gospel, one concerned with helping others—or only a Liberation Gospel, one focused on justice, and righting the wrongs in the world? Do we only preach the “God of Love”, where everything is sunny and bright—or only the “God of Judgment”, where everything is doom and gloom? Or do we preach the entire Gospel of Jesus Christ—a Gospel that includes Obedience and Sacrifice—themes intended to make God known in the world? ...And do we do it, even if it takes a personal toll?

Look at Abraham. He is a powerful biblical example, taking his own son Isaac out to Mount Moriah in order to sacrifice him. Only that looks more like child abuse to us than worship, or maybe even insanity! It seems strange! Or over the top! And yet on that very spot the Great Temple of Jerusalem was built. It holds deep significance for Christians and Jews alike! And on that very spot currently stands the third-most Holy site in all of Islam, The Dome of the Rock!

Abraham, the Father of Nations, in Obedience, through Faith, offering up his own son is one of the greatest examples of Faith the world has ever seen! The Book of James even tells us that God credited this Obedient act to him as Righteousness! And that God Himself called this man friend! But can you imagine how hard that sacrifice must have been for him?

The Lord called Abraham to, “Leave your country and your people, and your father’s household, and I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great! I will bless all people on earth through you. Your offspring will be as plentiful as the stars in the sky.” Only ten years later, there weren’t any children yet! Abraham had faced several wars on his Faith Journey, and had to put up with traveling from place to place with no apparent destination in mind! He has even survived his own wife Sarah being taken into Pharaoh’s harem! Can you imagine? But still, that promise had not yet been fulfilled! He obviously had Faith, what I would call a Dangerous Faith! He clearly trusted in God! But I don’t think it was always easy, do you!

Then, in the eleventh year of the Promise, his maid gets pregnant, and it finally looks as if his name and lineage will be carried on! Then, thirteen years later, his wife Sarah bears a son as well. Only these two boys don’t exactly get along, let alone make up a nation. We talked about that some last week. So, twenty-four years into his Journey of Faith, after twenty-four years of Obedience and Sacrifice, at the age of ninety-nine, there is finally a glimmer of hope! This “Great Nation Promise” might actually materialize! That is, until Sarah, in a fit of jealousy, has the oldest boy sent out into the desert to die! Now there is only one! Would you still be a Person of Faith?

Imagine Abraham’s emotional state, and his reluctance to be Obedient in today’s first reading. He is really on the spot here! God has told him to take his son Isaac, his only son left to him, and Sacrifice him as a burnt offering on top of a nearby mountain! Ishmael is gone! Only Isaac remains! There is no one, after this, to carry on the family line!

There is no possible Hope for God's Promise to be fulfilled! So, what would you do? Doubt the messenger maybe? God Himself, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, the very God who has promised to bless Abraham, and the world through him, is now commanding him to take his own flesh and blood, and offer him up! Can you see why I say this is Dangerous Faith?

Set aside the fact that you know the rest of the story, and how God provided, even in this dramatic moment! Abraham didn't know at the time! How would you feel, sitting alone in your tent late at night, pondering what to do with this God-given command! Are you a Person of Faith, or not? Do you follow the Lord, or not? Will you have no other gods before Him, or not? Imagine tossing and turning all night long, mentally preparing for the journey you are about to take in the morning! Picture yourself wrestling with God, both mentally and emotionally, and probably verbally! You are trying to be Obedient, and yet frantically praying for God to give you another way out of this mess! Now picture God's silence as your only answer!

It's pretty easy to be a Person of Faith when everything is going along just fine, isn't it! It's not that hard to get up and come to Church every Sunday, or every once in a while! You can put a "fish" symbol on the back of your car without hardly any repercussions at all! Even dropping a few bucks in the offering tray, or serving in one of the many necessary tasks at the Church doesn't take that much skin off of your nose, does it? There is no real-threat to you, as a Believer! There is no real danger at all! But again, what does that say? Would you be willing to Sacrifice for your Faith?

Thomas Long, an Author and Pastor, tells of reading the memoirs of a Jewish Rabbi, who during World War II, as a little boy, was thrown into one of the Death Camps with his family. The Rabbi said he was amazed how, in the Camp, no matter what was going on, his father would insist that they observe the Sabbath every week. They would gather quietly, and secretly, as a family. His father would find a candle from somewhere, and place the little stub on a table. He would light it, and they would say the great “Sabbath Prayers of Hope” for God to rebuild Creation.

One Sabbath, though, when they gathered, his father did not have a candle. So, he took their ration of butter, all the butter they had for the entire week, put it on the table, placed a piece of string in it, and lit it. The little boy was infuriated! “Papa, that’s all the butter we have! You’re burning it up!” His father said, “Son, we can live for many days without food. But we cannot live one hour without Hope! Let us say our Sabbath Prayers.”

So here is the Warning Label, in Great Big Bold Block Letters! “What God considers righteous, is the kind of Faith where you are willing to Sacrifice every single idol that you presently worship! Whatever it is that you put before Him! Be it free-time or money, security or retirement, family or friends, or a lump of butter! What God wants is the kind of Obedience that it takes for you to toss your most Prized Idol up on top of the Altar and set it ablaze, even if you are ninety-nine, and that particular Idol looks like the only way God can bless you!” Yay, this is definitely a Dangerous Faith, isn’t it? The kind of Faith that God can use to further His Kingdom! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy God, just like the psalmist, we cry out! And also like the psalmist, we ask for your hand in our lives each day. We too know of your mighty works in the past. We too trust in your unfailing love. And we too run into your arms when we are lonely or afraid. It is your counsel that we seek, Lord, when we are in need of guidance. And your voice that we search for, when we are in the Valley of the Shadow. You are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, in both our world, and in our hearts. You are all that we ever need!

Lord, as the source of all our strength, and our only comfort in times of testing, we stand before your Holy Altar of Grace. We stand in times of need, asking for your blessings in our lives. We stand in times of rejoicing, knowing that it is your hand that gives us all good gifts. And before your Altar of Grace we come Lord, when we are in need of forgiveness. Only in these times, we rarely stand. But rather, bow humbly, on our knees, seeking your Face. Thank you, Lord, for loving us like you do!

This morning, Father, we bow before you once again. And as we do, we bring with us the names of our loved ones, and in confidence, place them into your care. Please smile upon and bless Please reach out and touch these precious lives in truly amazing ways. And please, shower your love on each one of them, opening up their hearts to you.

We lay these requests at your feet, Lord, knowing that you will help us now to shoulder these burdens. And we set down our own pleas and petitions as well, knowing that you will provide what is best for us this day. And we do this today in your Son's Name, praying the way that He has taught us saying, Our Father...