

You have to Decide!

There are occasions in life when we face critical decisions, where we have to decide. I was recalling one such critical decision we faced during the Fall season on our farm when I was a teen and when I was just becoming aware of the risks of farming. In this particular year, we had a bumper crop in the field. However, the meteorologists were forecasting thunderstorms and a strong possibility of hail in the upcoming week, something Alberta gets much more of than BC. Hail storms are the farmers' worst nightmare. In less than 10 minutes, an entire crop can be wiped out at this time of year when the hail flattens the crops and strips the kernels from the stem of the plant. Farmers can buy hail insurance, but they have to buy it 24 hours in advance of the hail for the insurance to be valid. And it's expensive: the cost would eat well into any profit from the sale of the grain. But to lose your entire crop from hail would take you six or seven good years to recover. What to do? So the next couple of days after the longer-term forecast my parents had to make this important decision: would they buy hail insurance or not? Those were a tense couple of days trying to make that decision, a lot of pacing, furrowed brows and worried looks. It was a hard choice.

There are these moments when we are confronted with critical and sometimes tough decisions, personally, as communities, or as a global community. Moments where it is clear that you have to decide. Where to do nothing is itself a decision.

In sports terminology, these critical moments are often called crunch time. Crunch time. That point in the game where the outcome is on the line and time is running out. If I were Jake, I'd illustrate crunch time by telling you fantastical stories about Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson who has this uncanny ability with a couple minutes left in the game and his team behind by a touchdown to march down the field for a score. Wilson excels in crunch time. If you watch a Seahawks game with Jake as I have, you know that Jake also excels in his viewing behavior during crunch time by making excited and wild bodily gestures as he hovers across the room. In fact, I'd say it's just as fun watching Jake during crunch time as it is Russell Wilson.

Jesus' Crunch Time

Decision time. Crunch time. In the passages we heard Kathy recite today, we are approaching crunch time in Matthew's story of Jesus' mission. It was time to decide. Would the people follow Jesus in his way of bringing in the kingdom of God? Or would they take the popular way of the Pharisees and the crowds?

As we explore this crunch time in Jesus' public mission today, I want you to reflect upon what choices of this critical nature, this urgency, that Jesus is putting before you today. What decisions are we facing at this time in our history, both personally and as a society. Those decisions where not deciding will be a decision itself. I want you to think about these today as we explore this critical time in Jesus' mission.

To understand how we got to this crunch time in Jesus' public life, let's review briefly what we've read in Matthew's gospel. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has launched his public mission by announcing that God was becoming king. Good news for a people who were longing for this hope. However, Jesus way of bringing in the kingdom didn't look the way people expected that to happen.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus laid out a vision of how the kingdom that would come to the meek and humble, to those who carried a soldier's armor further than they demanded, who turned the other cheek, who forgave their enemies. In Jesus' vision of the kingdom, Israel would finally become a light to the nations, a source of healing rather than hate.

The Pharisees and the crowds had a different plan. Their way of restoring God's rule and order in the world was all about revolution. Swords, spears, surprise attacks: some hurt, some killed but with an anticipated victory in the end. Violence to defeat violence. A holy war against unholy warriors. Their vision was to love your neighbor, but hate your enemy. Stab him with his own dagger if you get the chance.

Two different visions for how God would bring their promised history to fruition. Also different were the people joining Jesus' vision. We've been reading in the past month how Jesus had gone around healing and restoring those who were broken or ostracized, extending God's generous invitation to share in his kingdom to unexpected guests, the poor, the lame – and not many powerful and rich were joining in.

What's more, the Pharisees and temple elite could see that if the people went Jesus' way, they would lose much of their power so they started fighting back against Jesus, here in chapters 11 and 12 by seeking to discredit him. In the passage before the one Kathy read, the crowds were calling him a glutton and drunkard. In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, these are terms used to describe a rebellious son. The Torah has harsh words for a rebellious son. It instructed folks to take this son – this glutton and drunkard - who puts the community in danger out of the town and stone him. So when the Pharisees call Jesus a glutton and drunkard, it's pretty clear what they are saying. "Jesus is a threat to the nation and he needs to be purged from among us." In chapter 12, the next chapter, they not only accuse him of being in league with the Satan, the deceiver himself, "the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus."

By the middle of Matthew's gospel then and the passage we heard today, things were not only heating up, they were coming to a head. The people were being faced with a decision. Would they go along with the crowds and the Pharisees? Or would they decide to follow Jesus and his way? The choice was becoming clear. Two different paths. To just slide along with the crowd would be to make a decision by default. This was crunch time. Decision time.

Warning: Danger this Way

This critical moment in Matthew's gospel is the context then that helps us to understand what are some of Jesus' harshest words of warning that we heard today. In these towns around his home in Capernaum where Jesus grew up, to his hometown folk, Jesus offers words of woe. I wonder if his personal relationships and concern for them were part of the reason why his warnings are so severe. He's very worried for them. Look, he says, if you keep going down the road you are going, it won't end well. Jesus could see, with both the clarity of the prophet and sheer common sense, that it would be better to have been in Sodom or Gomorrah with fire and ashes raining down from heaven than the total destruction that lay ahead for them if they kept going down this path of holy war, of violent revolution.

So what do you do when people you care about face imminent danger? You try to wake people up with the Jake Seahawks dance, with bold words, stark images. Jesus offered such a warning here. He warned them of dangers of the path ahead. He knew that this was the time to decide. The decision was so important that it would even divide families, as Jesus alludes in both chapters 10 and 12.

Jesus Shares an Intimate Moment

But Jesus was not only offering a loud warning, he was also offering a way out. I find this passage that follows Jesus' warning that we also heard this morning very intriguing. Here Matthew lets us in on some of the intimate musings of Jesus, presumably musings he shared with his closest followers. Here we are given a window into Jesus' own awareness of what was happening. And what he was aware of was that most people weren't getting the one he called Abba, Father. Jesus knew his Abba to be a generous, restoring, forgiving, just God, a far cry from the vengeful God dominating the popular scene. He had a special relationship to Abba that he was letting them in on, but not only were most people not getting it, they were getting their backs up in opposition to him, resorting to name calling and accusations.

What's ironic is that Jesus was offering the "rest" the people longed for. Throughout the Old Testament, we find images of rest, and refreshment, restoration linked to the coming kingdom. When the kingdom comes, they would find rest, peace in and around them.

So these harsh words of warning in chapter 11 are followed by perhaps Jesus' most generous words of welcome. Come follow me, he said, and I will give you the rest – the rest and restoration that you long for. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Jesus was a reflection of this gentle God. He was not only offering them a way out of the danger, he was offering them a way towards the peace they longed for. But most of the people weren't buying it.

There were some who were, however. Those whom Jesus refers to as "little children". Little children. Again, this had to be pretty surprising to most people. In Jewish life, the wisdom of the wise required a lifetime of dwelling in Torah, a lifetime of study that wasn't accessible to most people who were working hard just to make a living. The surprise Jesus names here is this: This gentle and humble God is accessible to anyone who is humble and gentle themselves. Take the path of humility and gentleness and you will find that the kingdom will be yours. "My yoke isn't really all that hard, my burden is pretty light", Jesus says.

So at this critical juncture in Jesus' mission, we see today why he offers this harsh warning, and we see Jesus' longing for the people to receive his gentle welcome. This was crunch time and Jesus was offering both a *way out* of danger, and a *way in* to the kingdom of peace and rest through himself.

Jesus' Warning and Welcome to Vancouverites

This warning and welcome of Jesus during the crunch time of his public mission got me wondering about what warning and what welcome Jesus would give today at our point in history. The more I reflected upon that question over the last couple weeks, the more I think Jesus would ask us something like this: how is your experiment of not taking God seriously nor my way of being human seriously working out for you? How is this experiment of not taking God seriously working? Two hundred or so years ago, the Western world started experimenting with the idea of living more or less without God, of trying to find meaning and happiness without God. The experiment has been repeated and expanded so many times over that for many people, especially in our city, it is the normal way of living.

I think this experiment of not taking God seriously is coming to a critical juncture, however and I wonder if Jesus would warn us about where this experiment will end up. I think that our secular ways of living, especially a secular culture shaped by shopping and the self at the center of it, are already starting to show some fissures and cracks. A secular worldview shaped by a culture of consumerism and individualism offers very little resistance to the trenchant problems of our day, problems like growing income inequality, or devaluation of the poor, or

exploitation of the creation. Secularism grew out of and has fed off of its Christian roots for a long time but for many folks those roots are dying off. What's becoming clearer I believe is that the ends of secularism are not the promised future of a united heaven and earth, or a world of healing and shalom. It's not those images of hope that we explored this summer, that we see again in Matthew's gospel, that the Spirit is working to establish in our world. No, the ends of a world devoid of God's action, and of God's call upon our lives and of Jesus' restoring power are not life but death.

And I think that some people are beginning to see that. I believe that many people are struggling to find solid hope in this secular context and city. Gord Carkner, a friend of some of us at this church, works on the UBC campus with students. He has written how many students today feel trapped in a sort of nihilism, a world where real meaning is illusive. For some folks, the best you can hope for are exciting experiences, not any sort of larger meaning - certainly not the sort of meaning that a world shaped by the God who lays down his life for us offers us.

I wonder if Jesus' warning would be this: this experiment of not taking God seriously is going to lead to deep trouble. This is not going to lead to hope but to despair and loss.

I do wonder if our Western culture is approaching a sort crunch time where the diverging roads are becoming clearer, between a way that finds meaning in the action and love of a restoring God vs. a way of trying to eke out meaning for ourselves in a world without God.

Jesus' Warning to the Church

Here's the problem when we talk about this warning about not taking God seriously. I'm not sure that churches and followers of Jesus have taken God very seriously either. I think Jesus would warn the church, his followers, as much as the rest of the city about the ends or results of not taking God seriously.

Indeed, when the church gives into consumerism and does little to care for the poor or seek justice for the least, are we taking this God seriously who welcomed the poor and healed the outsiders? When the church does little to lessen or challenge the growing division of rich and poor, especially around housing in our city, are we taking seriously the God who made room for the least? When we don't consider this God's good earth and ourselves as stewards of it, when we don't echo creation's praise and practice care for it, are we taking God's call on our lives seriously? When we slough off our relational commitments to one another, our neighbors, our spouses, are we taking Jesus' seriously or not? If we don't believe the gospel and live it out, if we don't take God and God's action seriously, it's hard to imagine other people in our city doing so.

I want to be honest. I am preaching to myself today as much as to you. I find it as easy as anyone to slide into the way of the crowds myself, to fall into the trap of "self" and just drift along at times as though God doesn't matter or doesn't do much, instead of seeking first the kingdom of God. But then again, sliding along with the crowds is a choice.

The Church as the Hermeneutic of the Gospel

I had the opportunity to teach a class at UBC campus at the Vancouver school of theology this week. And one student after another told me that they are both struggling and longing to form or find a church that takes Jesus seriously. They can see where that's not happening but they aren't seeing much of where it is happening.

Leslie Newbigin, who spent most of his life in India as a missionary but who came back to become a missionary in his homeland of England, argued that in a culture that had left Christianity behind and no longer finds it very plausible, it will only be as churches learn to take Jesus seriously that they will make the gospel a more plausible option.

He wrote these prophetic words: **“I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible for the gospel to be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic or way to understand the Gospel, is a congregation of people who believe it and live by it.”**

Herein then lies the welcome I believe Jesus is offering us today. “Come, follow me, take me seriously, and I will use you to bring a little more restoration and peace into this city. My yoke is easy, doable, my burden is light.

This isn’t about doing more and more and more, denying your limits; this is about being intentional, it is about making the decisions we need to make, to take up this way of life Jesus calls us to take up, this way of hospitality, justice, care for this creation, prayer.” If you have been around here for awhile, you know that I just named some of our seven seeds of the kingdom, these practices that we believe can form us to be salt and light in our city, to form us into being a people who make the gospel a little more plausible in the words of Newbigin.

When we do seek the kingdom in sacrificial ways, the gospel does begin to shine. We’ve seen glimpses of that in our life and mission. You do see the power of the gospel in a number of other churches around our city. I wish there were more. I hope we will continue to be one of them.

Does Anyone Get God?

Let me conclude by saying this: If you do seek to take God seriously and seek first the kingdom of God, it can feel like hardly anyone around you gets God. Do you know what I mean? Whether at work, with family, working for good alongside others, so many folks in our city think God is irrelevant or non-existent. You know that this God we meet in Jesus is both relevant, loving in ways that touch the deepest part of your being, and at work in the world to bring healing and restoration. But it can seem like it did for Jesus: people just aren’t getting the one we know as God. It is almost like God has been hidden from us. Taking God seriously can feel so abnormal in our culture at times.

But look, the truth is that over the long history of the world this Western cultural experiment in sloughing off God is what is abnormal. I think the future history will eventually bear that out as well. If indeed we are created in God’s image and God has come to restore us through Christ by the power of the Spirit at work in us and in the world today, any kind of “normal” that ignores that reality is off the mark. That kind of normal misses the way, the truth and the life and hope of the world. Who needs that kind of normal?

So let’s take this warning to heart today: Secularism is not enough. Sliding down that road is going to lead to hopelessness and carnage, personally and as a society.

And let’s receive and respond to Jesus’ invitation today too. “Come, follow me, and I will give you rest. Come, follow me, take my yoke upon you, take God more seriously, and I will form you into persons and into the church in a way that makes the gospel more plausible once again.”

As we prepare to commit ourselves to this calling again in the communion meal, I want to give us a moment to reflect on the specific decisions we are being called to make in order to take God more seriously. What decision are you being called to make? What decisions are we being called to make as a community?