

“Detailed Instructions”

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher W. Keating

Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 10:24-39

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Jesus continues to provide the “talk” to the disciples – spelling out the hazards and rewards of involved in proclaiming the kingdom.

The other evening our family watched the powerful movie, “The Hate U Give.” The movie is currently streaming free on HBO and Amazon and is based on a novel by Angie Thomas. It is the story of a teenaged Black girl named Starr Carter who is the only witness to the police shooting of her best friend. Her friend is killed when a police officer thought he was reaching for a gun, which tragically turns out to be a hairbrush.

As the movie begins, the camera shows scenes from Starr’s neighborhood. It’s a normal, beautiful day – children are playing, neighbors are talking, folks are going about their business. As the camera approaches the Carter house, we begin to hear bits of a conversation taking place between Starr’s parents and her young siblings. Starr narrates the scene, telling us that she was still in elementary school this first time her father had given her “the talk.” As the camera pulls into the Carter’s kitchen we discover what this “talk” is about. Her father’s tone is serious as he relays specific instructions to his five and six-year-old children about how they are to respond when a police officer pulls them over. “You better believe we are going to be pulled over,” he tells them, “You’ll see me with my hands like this,” spreading his hands on the table.

It is a version of the conversation Black families have been having with their children for generations: Be safe. Be calm. Keep your hands out of your pockets.

“The Talk” emerges from fears marinated in the toxic bath of racism and racial bias. I cannot fully appreciate the realities faced by my Black friends I do understand what it means to be concerned for your children. Like any parents, Black parents fear for their children’s safety. Yet their fears are mingled with a different set of realities.

No matter how old we are or how old our children are, we worry about our children. I know that even up to the day that she died my 94-year-old mother expressed fears for her children and grandchildren.

We fear that the world may be bigger than our kid's bravado.
We fear that we may not have done enough to give them skills to survive.
We fear that lives can be broken more easily than they are mended.
We fear that they will fly from our nests with their own sense of fear unchecked.

We fear those terrors that fly by night.

Jesus' version of the talk begins here in Matthew chapter 10. The disciples have watched as he has proclaimed kingdom. He has forgiven sins and healed diseases, and now begins turning the mission over to the apostles – the ones he has sent into the world. "A disciple is not above the teacher," he begins. What follows are a series of pithy aphorisms of discipleship wisdom. He gives them the talk:

All things will be revealed.
No secrets will be held.
You will be detained, arrested, beaten.
You will be asked to deny you knew me.
Your entire family may turn against you.

These are the tribulations which faced Matthew's church. The tensions the early Christians faced were deep and painful, including constant clashes with religious and political leaders. They were vulnerable, subject to constant persecution.

They had reason to be afraid.
They had many reasons to be afraid.

Because of this, Jesus' message is clear: "Do not be afraid." It is this assurance which undergirds his entire message.

When fear seeps into our lives, it seizes control of our well-being. Our ability to make good decisions is impaired by these fears: fears of external threats, fears of disease, fears of powers beyond our control.

Fears of mashed potatoes.

Let me explain. One time when one of our daughters was a toddler, she fell asleep while eating dinner. I put her down in her crib and came back to check on her a few minutes later. Something looked off. I couldn't tell what, but a wave of fear gripped me. I looked closely at our daughters' head. Something grey was caked all around her ear. And here is where the rational part of my conscious stopped functioning. "Her brain is coming out!" I shouted, yelling for Carol to come quick. Carol, always the calmest parent, reached in and smooshed her finger in the gray stuff. "Looks more like mashed potatoes to me," she said calmly.

There was nothing to fear except the mashed potatoes.

Jesus knows, however, that the fears the disciples will encounter – and by extension, the fears we will encounter – go much deeper than leftover food.

A Gallop Poll this spring indicated that more Americans were more afraid of the coronavirus than they were about facing a severe financial hardship due to the virus.¹

We live with the fear of the illness. It generates anxiety, shutting down our capacity to find the reassurance God provides. The predictable, ordinary routines of life ended in the middle of March, and we are only now beginning to understand that “normal” is not returning anytime soon. Returning to the way things were before the virus struck is not possible.

But what is possible is the promise which surrounds us as we step into this new moment.

It’s the promise of Jesus, the promise reiterated in this text no less than three times. “Do not fear” is welded to the infrastructure of faith. It is a promise that comes “in the midst of” rather than “instead of” pain and struggle, notes Denise Thorpe.² It is the promise which has propelled the church to take difficult, even dangerous stands, on issues such as human and civil rights. And it is this promise which is with us now as we begin the difficult work of being the church in a post-pandemic world.

Who knew we would be in this place? Who knew that the church, already struggling with institutional decline and loss of members, would be forced to worship virtually instead of in person? Who knew that we would be shaken to our core, wracked by worries over finances and mission?

The assurance is this: not even the lowliest sparrow falls to the crowd undetected by God.

Remember the words of the old Gospel song?

Why should I feel discouraged
Why should the shadows come
Why should my heart feel lonely
And long for heaven and home
When Jesus is my portion
A constant friend is He
His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watches over me...

The refrain continues:
I sing because I'm happy
I sing because I'm free
His eye is on the sparrow

¹ See <https://news.gallup.com/poll/308504/fear-covid-illness-financial-harm.aspx>

² Denise Thorpe, *Connections*, Year A, Vol. 3, p. 101 (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2020.)

And I know He watches me (He watches me)
His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watches
I know He watches
I know He watches me³

That is our assurance: even as we challenge the status quo with the message of Christ, God watches over us. The pathways of life are hard – and the pathways of faithfulness even harder. Still, God is watching. God is present. God causes us to sing.

Jesus tells us this may not be the sort of work you envisioned at all, and indeed, few churches advertise the hardships of discipleship on their Facebook pages and websites. Most tell you “we’re a friendly and welcoming congregation...you’ll feel at home here.” And while there’s truth in that, there is a greater promise: those who lose their lives shall find them. Those who feel lost and afraid shall encounter grace. Those who seek to take part in proclaiming the promises of God will find sanctuary. Do not be afraid.

We are facing a difficult, painful moment in culture, and the very institutions – church, government, education, healthcare, that we look to for support are under attack. Families are needing to have the talk. Our streets are filled with unrest, and our pews are empty. It feels as though we may have to begin rebuilding the church from scratch – and it can feel so discouraging.

But here’s the thing: undergirding each moment is the rock solid assurance of God’s presence. Time and time again Jesus offers this assurance: have no fear. God’s eye is on the sparrow, and so we sing because we are free. Amen.

³ “His Eye Is On The Sparrow,” Civilla D. Martin (Public domain, 1905).