

## **Sermon: Drawing the line in the sand**

“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

I don't remember struggling more with the gospel than I have in the last few weeks. And I don't mean struggling to interpret the truth of the gospel. I mean struggling with that truth in my life, struggling with what that truth reveals about us and our country, struggling with what that truth is asking of us, and struggling with that truth in what I say to you each Sunday.

I want to be true to the truth, but I also don't want to be inconvenienced and uncomfortable, challenged to change, or risk disapproval and being criticized, personally or as a pastor. And I suspect you feel the same as a hearer of the gospel.

Don't you sometimes just want an easy, feel-good gospel? I certainly do at times. Sometimes I want a gospel that affirms our life as it is and leaves us alone. I want a gospel that's easy to preach, easy to hear, and easy to live.

None of that, however, is likely to happen today. Jesus has taken his sword and drawn a line in the sand.

Jeremiah felt the cut of that sword in his own life. “Whenever I speak,” he says, “I must cry out, I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’” He can no longer ignore or turn away from what is happening. He cannot hold it in. He knows what he must do and where he must stand.

The line has been drawn. The line Jesus draws is a line between acknowledging him before others and denying him before others. And I am not talking about whether we read the Bible, go to church, say Creeds or take communion.

I am talking about how we live, what we say and don't say, what we do and don't do, the policies we enact or support and the ideas behind them. I am talking about where and with whom we make our stand today.

There are, however, other lines in the sand. Jesus isn't the only one who draws lines. Some we have drawn for ourselves and some have been drawn for us by others. They're not hard to see.

Look at the lines that have been drawn about racism. Think about who is and who isn't welcome in our cities, towns and villages and why. Lines run through poverty, violence, and injustice. And they run through the lack of equality, education, and healthcare.

What does the line that Jesus draws have to do with these situations or any other situation where you see lines being drawn? What do those situations look like when we acknowledge Jesus in them? When we deny him in them?

I wouldn't be surprised if right about now some of you feel that I may have crossed a line, that I've gone from preaching to meddling, that I have left behind the gospel for politics. That is definitely not my intent.

If Jesus can say, "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;" might he not also say, "Whoever loves the politicians destroying our way of life more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves his or her own position, opinion, or agenda more than me is not worthy of me?"

The line Jesus draws with his sword intersects every one of the issues I raised and more. It intersects the lines you and I see being drawn in our country today. It runs through your life and my life. It runs through our country. It runs through our thoughts, words, and deeds.

For Jesus there is only one line that matters. That's why I so struggle with today's gospel. It holds before us a set of values, a way of being, a truth that we either acknowledge or deny. We cannot straddle that line – one foot here, the other there. There is no middle ground on which to stand. And we can't toggle the line to make our life easier.

Jesus' sword cuts through everything. The line he draws runs through every single grain of sand in our life. That line reveals and calls us into a greater priority, a higher authority, a truer identity. Where we stand in relation to that line will determine who we are, the values we hold, and how, or even if, we love our neighbor.

If you want to know where Jesus stands, what he stands for, and with whom he stands look for the places of brokenness and dis-ease; look for love, justice, compassion, peace; look for people who are hurting, marginalized, oppressed, devalued. That's where we see Jesus drawing a line in the sand and taking a stand.

“Blessed are you who are poor, you who are hungry now, and you who weep now.” “But woe to you who are rich, you who are full now, you who are laughing, and you when all speak well of you.”

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus stands with the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.

After his temptation in the wilderness Jesus went to the synagogue in his hometown and took a stand “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

When Jesus was only forty days old Simeon prophesied that Jesus would draw a line in the sand. “This child,” he said, “is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.”

What line is Jesus drawing in the sands of your life today? What is being revealed to you? And what is being asked of you? Are you acknowledging Jesus? Are you denying him?

Those are the questions I ask myself. I think we all need to be asking ourselves those questions everyday of our life because we all stand somewhere. We all take a stand by our actions and inactions, by our words and our silence, by our thoughts and intentions.

When you look at the line Jesus has drawn in your life today –

- Where do you stand?
- For what do you stand?
- With whom do you stand?

In the Jewish tradition there’s a collection of ethical teachings. In it one of the rabbis says this. “It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

I had those words in mind as the ending to this sermon even before I began writing it. I heard them as invitation to truthfulness, authenticity, honesty, and integrity. They held a vision of the work before me. I trust those words will lead me to a life worthy of Jesus.

And I extend that invitation to you. “It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

Amen