

A priest friend of mine was holding forth on how much he hates this passage and never wants to preach on it. I forget if that was before or after he went on about how terrible it is when people choose to live in “echo chambers,” and reject anything that doesn’t support what they already believe. It’s funny because it’s true; we know both that most people claim to be open minded — until they’re confronted with things they don’t want to hear. We *should* be more afraid of ignorance than of unpleasant truths.

Now, open mindedness is important, certainly better than knee-jerk denial, but healthy skepticism can be a good thing, too. When politicians claim that people are in terrible danger unless we vote for them, we should seek confirmation of the alleged threat before we vote to give them power. For example, while crime has gone up somewhat in the last couple of years, our country is still safer than it was 30 or 40 years ago. People say “speed kills,” but the safest roads in America are our interstate highways. I could go on, but I don’t want this sermon to turn into a rehashing of “Adam Ruins Everything” episodes.

And more to the point, not everything can be proven or refuted with statistics. Like all of the things Jesus said in today’s Gospel. There’s never a *good* time to unpack a passage that begins with Jesus saying, “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master.” Denial won’t help, but fortunately, Jesus wasn’t commenting on the institutions so much as he was setting the disciples’ expectations of their relationship with him, because Jesus is not like other teachers. While other students can and often should aspire to one day exceed the mastery and wisdom of their teachers, Jesus’s disciples will always have more to learn from him, and we will always be subject to his authority.

But of course verses like this have been used in ways completely at odds with Jesus and his movement, including arguing for slavery, as if we needed further evidence that the devil can quote Scripture for his own purposes. Others have pointed out that nowhere in Jesus’s words is there an explicit call to abolish slavery. That is literally true... and so beside the point. Jesus was advocating not for the end of one form of injustice and oppression, but for the end of all of them; it’s not like Jesus would have approved of America’s replacement of slavery with Jim Crow. When St. Paul wrote, “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” he was asking a rhetorical question, not issuing a challenge! Jesus did call out some specific injustices in his own place and time, but those denunciations were ancillary to his overarching vision of God’s will being done, on earth as it is in heaven, where faithfulness is the only measure and love, the only law.

Obviously this is a very different value system than the one we maintain on Earth, and every system resists efforts to change it, sometimes violently. Even good news and popular reforms can be threatening to those who have a vested interest in the status quo. Some peoples’ jobs, and sometimes entire industries, are built around

problems. I, for one, am glad that modern sanitation and medicine have put the plague doctors out of business. And then there is the satisfaction some people derive simply from the status or power they have relative to other people. Jesus owed his disciples this brutal honesty, for his mission would put them in direct conflict with the world, and if they tried to undertake his mission expecting it always to be easy and pleasant, they likely would have given up at the first major difficulty.

But Jesus had the end in mind, and this end makes all the suffering worthwhile. In the midst of preparing his disciples for the difficulties they would encounter, he reminded them of the reason why he and they were sent by God: because of how much God loves us and wants to save us. God takes careful note of everything we do and everything that is done to us; we are so precious that God even numbers the hairs of our heads.

But even this puts us into conflict with the world. Secular society loves to rank and categorize people. Oppressing people because of their race, sex, orientation, or circumstances of birth is, of course, egregiously wrong and sinful. But we kid ourselves when we think that defining the relative worth of people based on their credentials, accomplishments, popularity, and wealth makes us more enlightened. Jesus points out that to God, all human beings are inherently precious, simply because God made us in God's own image. He made the point most dramatically in his own life and death. Not only did Jesus reject political and military power, he made himself utterly powerless, allowing himself to be arrested and confined, and giving up his life. Ironically, Jesus allowed himself to be hated and rejected because of how much God loves us and wants to save us.

Another uncomfortable implication that Jesus draws out is that since we are so precious to God, God should be precious to us. There is no end of things trying to be our highest priority, and many of them are inherently good. Love of God is certainly more important than any form of comfort, hence the injunction to take up the cross and follow Jesus. But God, by nature, is above *all* other things, so we should be honest about this, and yes, put God ahead of all other good things, even our families. Jesus said that not to diminish familial love, but to elevate love of God. And remembering that loving God always comes first can make it easier to set priorities, bring our whole lives into healthy, peaceful order, and find more love to share with the world. For example, we can love family by sharing God's love with them, bringing them to church and giving them all the love we can offer.

Yes, today's Gospel has some parts that sound scary, but ultimately, the only thing we should truly fear is separation from God, and God doesn't want that to happen. That's why God sent prophets, culminating in God's own Son — God never stops calling us into relationship with God, so that, as St. Paul said, "we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Loving God and our neighbors will actually make us happier than the things we thought were so important, the things the world says make

us worthy, but were only binding our hearts and souls.

Right relationship with God doesn't mean that we're perfect people. We don't have to love perfectly — only God can do that. We don't even have to be particularly open minded — that's a good way to be, but it's more important that we open our souls and accept God's gifts of love, life, and grace. When we do, we have nothing to fear, for when we live in love, we are truly free.