

Most of us work hard to avoid the uncomfortable, to avoid the hard conversations, to avoid the hard topics, the hard realities, and the challenge that comes with being a devoted follower of Christ on this Peninsula. It's just easier to splash around in the shallow end. It's harder when Christ calls us to follow him out into deeper waters so we can depend on him. Why? Because we better learn to swim better or we will drown.

But God shows us today Jesus' life and John the Baptist's own experiences of following Christ that he calls us into these deeper waters. If we identify as shallow Christians, following Christ into deeper waters is something to be avoided, ignored, or even feared.

God understands that it's easier to splash around in the shallow end of faith and think you are really swimming. But God meets us in the shallow end and seeks to draw us to deeper waters where we can't touch bottom, where we must trust him and swim.

But when Jesus says "*follow me and I will make you fishers of men*" and when Jesus says, "*take up your cross and follow me*" he is saying to us, "Follow me. Take my hand; I will hold you in my arms. Let us venture out into the deeper waters together. I know this is uncomfortable for you. I know this is hard but is worth the cost for you to learn to swim so you can follow me." As Mark taught us last week, the kingdom of God is worth any cost to any person.

Our text reveals to us today some uncomfortable thoughts for thoughtful followers of Christ, which lead us to deeper spiritual waters. We expect hardship when we follow Christ into deeper waters but God uses these hardships to grow us, encourage others, and honor him.

We have reached a turning point in Matthew's Gospel. We are seeing the world around Jesus becoming more and more hostile to him and his followers. Jesus has been using parables to reveal the deeper truths to those who want to hear and swim in deeper waters and hide these truths of the kingdom from those who only want to splash in the shallow end. Also, we are seeing that Jesus is spending less time with the crowds and more time with his closest disciples to equip the few of them for that day when he will no longer be with them.

This morning we pick up the narrative in Matthew chapter 13 beginning in verse 53 and see through the example of Christ himself that when we leave the shallows and wade out into deeper waters to follow him, we will face unbelief.

As Followers of Christ, We Face Unbelief

When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. (Matthew 13:53–54)

We know from the prior chapter that Jesus had been ministering in and around Capernaum on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. That was

Peter's hometown and had likely been Jesus' basecamp for his ministry around Galilee. So he finished teaching the parables recorded in chapter 13, and it says Jesus moved on from there. So from Capernaum, he made a stop in his boyhood hometown. We know this to be the town of Nazareth where Mary and Joseph put down roots and raised Jesus and the rest of their family. Nazareth was a sleepy little town about 15 miles to the south and west of Capernaum. Jesus and the rest of Joseph and Mary's kids grew up in Nazareth. The people in the town saw Jesus grow up. They saw him throw rocks and make mud pies with his brothers and sisters. They saw him fall and skin his knee. They saw his mother wipe his nose and nurse him when he didn't feel well. They saw him grow from a boy to a man in all ways. They had to notice that something was different about him by what he said and did and how he loved. They saw him respect his father and join the family business and become a carpenter. We don't have much recorded in Scripture about Jesus' boyhood. But we do know according to Luke 4 when he became a young adult and was baptized by John, he returned home to Nazareth and did what any good young rabbi would do. He went to the synagogue and opened the Isaiah scroll to chapter 61 verses 1–2 and read that famous passage announcing the coming of the Messiah to save the people. He put it down and returned to his seat and gave the interpretation by saying to his astonished family and neighbors, "*Today the scripture has been fulfilled right in your midst,*" and they responded, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" They became angry. They didn't humble themselves, they didn't rejoice, they didn't believe; instead they rose up and tried to run him out of town.

So now, back to Matthew 13, it's about two years later, and he returns home, this time with a reputation. Are we about to read, "Hometown Boy Makes Good?" Look at what happens when he returns home. *He began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked.*

So his town was amazed at his wisdom. And they discussed among themselves the miracles they heard he had performed the past two years around Galilee. They questioned it. "How could this be? He didn't study at the most famous schools. He had no more formal training than the average Jewish man. How do we explain his knowledge and power? It makes no sense. He is just an ordinary kid from an ordinary family, isn't he?"

"Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" (verses 55–56)

I mean, we have seen Jesus' brothers. We saw them hanging out. They were no saints. And his sisters, don't get us started. And Jesus is part of this family? Instead of accepting the obvious and overwhelming evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfillment of Isaiah 61, they turn

their attention to the diversion of his family instead of facing the truth right in front of them. The family dynamic is interesting for sure, but it isn't relevant to who Jesus is.

After the virgin birth, Jesus' mother Mary and father Joseph began normal marital relations and produced four half-brothers to Jesus, and we don't know how many half-sisters. It is interesting to read about, but it should not stop anyone in that town from believing in Jesus by the evidence already revealed. And they thought about what he said to them, "How dare this young man from an ordinary family down the street claim the title of Messiah. I mean his family is no better than mine. How dare HE preach to us about our sin, about repentance, about surrender, and the kingdom of Heaven. How dare he lecture us about our Law.

And they took offense at him. (verse 57a)

It's one thing not to be accepted by strangers, but here to have your message rejected by those who knew you the longest had to make Jesus sad. Unbelief can hide itself in the sin of pride. It requires a particular kind of humility to hear and receive something new and life-changing from someone very familiar. It was a kind of humility the people of Nazareth did not have. So much so they became offended at him.

As followers of Christ, we are confronted with unbelief every day from those who know us well. We have to accept that uncomfortable truth. We need to live with that tension and not be tempted to run away but to live in that tension. We are to go out as a follower of Christ. We will have to face up to the unbelief around us and continue to sow seeds, continue to pray, continue to model, until God chooses to move them or us along. This is wading into deep waters. This is our calling as followers of Christ to continue to engage and face unbelief, in our families, at our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, and social circles. It's our calling as followers of Christ to follow in the steps of Jesus. And it's some of the hardest faith stuff to persevere when faced with unbelief and rejection, especially by those who know us well.

We are tempted just to shake the dust off our shoes, walk away and insulate ourselves from the unbelief around us. But to follow Christ means we are to continue to sow seeds even on the hardest path and not be deterred. Our job is to sow gospel seeds. Our job is to explain the evidence. Our job is to tell what God is doing in our lives. Our job is to love our neighbor.

And what makes following Christ and facing unbelief so hard is that not every story has a happy ending. Even for Jesus, prejudice, background, family connections, and politics became strongholds that blocked faith. And it happened even in his own hometown. It's the old saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt."

But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home" And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith. (verses 57b–58)

In Nazareth, Jesus chose to do his miracles in response to faith, and the lack of faith was so great, he didn't perform many miracles. Nazareth had blocked itself from the release of God's power and the flow of God's blessing.

It's a good lesson for us all. We may be least respected for our faith by those who knew us when. That's tough to swallow. I remember a couple of years after I accepted Christ, I called my oldest sister and we

were talking about my plans after graduation. She knew me when, but she had moved away. I told her I was planning to go to seminary after college. And I still remember it. The phone went silent on the other end. It was awkward. I thought the line went dead. Hello? Hello? Did she faint? Was there a medical emergency? Then she said, "You are going to be a pastor?"

"Well, I was planning on it until this phone call," I said.

It must have been hard for my sister to take her obnoxious little brother seriously having known me back when. It turns out she was a genuine seeker. She came to accept and believe in Christ because many people loved her. They were willing to leave the shallows, wade into the deep water, face her unbelief, and sow seeds into her life.

So followers of Christ must embrace the uncomfortable truth of facing up to unbelief. We must face the uncomfortable truth of wading into the deep and face up to spiritual darkness.

As Followers of Christ We Face (spiritual) Darkness

We are now introduced to a new and troubling man named Herod the Tetrarch. Let me explain this man to you. His life would make a pretty creepy Netflix series.

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him." (Matthew 14:1–2)

To help us understand Herod we must first look at his family. Herod the Tetrarch was actually the son of King Herod the Great. Remember Herod the Great? He was the crazy tyrant who put to death all the boys under age two in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod the Great's son, Herod, the tetrarch, was also named Antipas. His mom was his father, Herod's, fourth wife out of ten. Daddy Herod was insanely jealous of anyone who might take over his power, and he had family members killed. There was a saying on the street, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." If you thought your dad was bad, imagine having King Herod the Great as your dysfunctional father.

Herod Antipas got the title tetrarch because when his dad died, Rome divided his father's domain into three parts and gave the rule to three of Herod's sons—Archelaus, Philip, and Antipas. The title tetrarch means subordinate ruler of a Roman province. Antipas was never a king. He governed Galilee only at the pleasure of Rome.

Now the family tree gets really confusing. Antipas had married an Arabian princess. Antipas had a brother who was murdered by his father, Herod the Great. This murdered brother had a daughter named Herodias. Herodias married one of Antipas's surviving brothers named Philip. So Herodias was Herod Antipas's niece and his sister-in-law. Can you see them all being lined up on the stage of the Dr. Phil show?

So Antipas fell in love with his brother's wife, who was also his niece and sister-in-law. He proposed to a woman who was married to his brother. They both got a divorced from their spouses. Herodias and her teenage-old daughter named Salome moved in with Herod Antipas.

So Antipas heard about Jesus' miracles, and he became afraid. Antipas was superstitious, and he thought Jesus was actually John the Baptist who had come back from the dead to haunt him in his guilt for what he had done. What did Antipas do to John? Two years before Antipas had

arrested John and threw him in prison. About one year later, Antipas, had John executed.

Our story continues with a flashback of about one year to the story of John the Baptist's execution.

Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet. (verses 3–5)

Can you see the spiritual darkness? Antipas was morally corrupt; he was superstitious, he was a murderer in his heart, and had a guilty conscience because somewhere inside, Antipas knew what he did was wrong and John called him out on it. So what happens next? Antipas throws himself a birthday party.

On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted... (verses 6–9)

So Herod invites all the powerful dirty old men of Galilee to his party. And when it was time for the dirty entertainment, his wife's teen daughter danced. "Pleased" literally means it pleased his lust to see her dance. And in some kind of stupor, he makes an oath to give her anything she wants. Herodias was no doubt tired of hearing John face up to her own spiritual darkness, so she determined that he needed to be killed. She has her daughter ask for the head of John to be served to her on a dinner platter. Remember he wasn't a king. Unlike his father, Antipas wasn't sovereign over anything, but he promised anyway. And he promised things he had no authority to grant.

Because of Herod's darkness, weakness, fear, and a need to save face in front of his wife and guests, he ordered John's execution. The executioner descended the steps into the dungeon of the palace and quickly decapitates John and delivers his severed head back up to the party.

The uncomfortable truth of this story is when we follow Jesus, as John followed Jesus, we will be facing spiritual darkness. And to his death, John kept protesting and standing up for righteousness. That is a question for all of us is this: Are we protesting anything? Are we in any way protesting the spiritual darkness around us?

Have we left the shallows enough to even have tension with the darkness? Do our families, our neighbors, or our co-workers know what we stand for? Do we go to that uncomfortable place to confront the darkness? Do we wade out far enough to even sense the slightest bit of the great tension between light and darkness that John felt in that dungeon as a follower of Christ?

Here is a picture of one of the most interesting but least talked about protestant reformers. His name was Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer served as the Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Queen Mary, or Bloody Mary as she will be remembered. When Mary came to power in England, she demanded all the Protestant bishops to reconvert to Roman Catholicism by pain of death. For a time, Cranmer stayed reformed. But eventually, the darkness overwhelmed him. He watched

two of his friends, reformers, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Rigley burn at the stake for facing the darkness. So out of fear, Cranmer recanted his reformed faith in writing, and he escaped execution.

But on the eve of what was supposed to be his execution, he repented for staying in the shallow end. He waded deep to follow Christ. He stood in St. Mary's Church in Oxford and said, "And now I come to the great thing which so much troubleth my conscience, more than anything that ever I did or said in my whole life, and that is the setting abroad of a writing contrary to the truth... and written for fear of death, and to save my life, if it might be... And forasmuch as my hand hath offended, writing contrary to my heart, therefore my hand shall first be punished; for when I come to the fire it shall first be burned."

As Foxe's *Book of the Martyrs* says, "Thomas Cranmer when tied to the stake and surrounded by flames in good conscience placed his right hand in the consuming fire, allowing his body rather than his soul to burn." Persecution comes in various forms. And the uncomfortable truth for deep thinking followers of Christ is that following Christ means we face up to persecution.

As Followers of Christ, We Face Persecution

And (Antipas) had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. (verses 10–12)

For John, facing up to the darkness led to his death as the first martyr to die for following Christ. And John's disciples took John's headless body and buried it, and then they went to Jesus to tell him what happened. No doubt Jesus used that time to prepare his disciples for the deep water ahead, where he would be next to die. His closest disciples would follow him on a similar path into deep waters.

Jesus waded into the deep waters all the way to the cross at Golgotha and into a grave, and then resurrected from the grave victorious. When we wade into deep waters, remember who we are following. We are following the one who conquered death, who broke the power of sin, who rewards his most serious followers. We are following the one who offers us grace and empowers us by his Holy Spirit to follow him. What happened to Herod Antipas? He became a blip in history, never becoming the king he wanted to become. But we follow Jesus. Jesus was given the title and reigns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who has all authority over heaven and earth.

I am aware of people in our church family who have waded into deep waters to follow Jesus, and they suffered for it. I have heard the stories of the loss of a job, legal judgments against them, harassment from employers, and even harassment from family members, because of their faith. I hear these stories, and they break my heart, but they also convict and encourage me. I see that wading deep has allowed these modern-day Thomas Cranmers to honor God, grow their faith, and encourage the rest of us. These modern-day Thomas Cranmers, right here at CPC, are heroes for our generation on the peninsula because they were willing to stick their hand in the fire to follow Christ.

And when we accept the uncomfortable truth and are challenged to wade deeper as followers of Christ, we will need each other's prayers and encouragement more and more. I hope this is both convicting and

encouraging. It is definitely sobering. The Apostle Paul weighs in on this. He said,

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, (2 Timothy 3:12).

I like Christian Radio. And the station I listen to has a slogan. It's "Positive, encouraging and safe for the whole family." I remember liking that because I didn't have to worry what my kids would hear. I could relax and enjoy what is positive, encouraging, and safe music. Even though that radio station was positive, encouraging and safe for the whole family, we are reminded today that following Christ isn't safe for the whole family. Following Christ isn't safe for the follower who wades out into deeper waters.

If we are following Christ and following the example of John in places where we live and work, it likely won't feel safe. Because we will be following them into places where we will be called to face up to unbelief, darkness, and potential persecution.

Thomas Cranmer wrote another prayer. It is a petition for God's work in our lives by asking God to allow us to follow John's example. The Archbishop's prayer goes like this, "Make us so... to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to John's preaching; and after his example, constantly speak truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake." This prayer was inspired by John's life. And it calls for us to address three issues if we are to go deep.

Repentance

We can't go deep without repentance. If we like our sin, we can't face up to sin where we live and work. John began his ministry by preaching these words, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**" And Jesus did the same. I wonder if the reason we refuse to wade into deeper waters is that we enjoy splashing in the sins of the shallow end. Are we more like Antipas and less like John than we care to admit? When we read about Antipas are we truly offended by his life? Is there some sin that entangles us and keeps us from wading out to follow Christ? Are we bound in a sinful relationship? Trapped by a sinful thought life? Trying to manage but not remove some indulgence, some bad habit? Unwilling to honestly look inside for less talked about sins like greed, stinginess, laziness, and gluttony? Do we act prideful like the Nazarenes? Are we unwilling to open ourselves up to God working outside our tradition or beyond our comfort level? Are we cynical, not believing that God would even want to work in new and life-giving ways to bring revival to us, our church, and the world where each of us works and lives? Are we all

in or are we trying to follow Christ and still manage our favorite sin? Jesus and John preached repent. So repent. Confess our sin to God, then commit to turning the opposite direction and cling to Jesus as he leads us into deeper waters.

Constantly Speaking the Truth in Love

We learned today that John was brave. Did we learn that we can be brave too? Do we even speak the truth to those who likely don't agree? Do we speak the truth or bite our tongues. Some of us need enemies to love. We don't have enemies because we don't speak the truth. Some of us need to receive the challenge of having enemies because we have spoken the truth in love. May God give us the grace to wade deeper and speak the truth in love to face up and protest immoralities. Even if it means the hard thing of confronting people we know and love with humility, gentleness, and love, with careful attention to the situation and to the person we are addressing.

Patiently Suffering for the Sake of Truth

And finally, we learned from John's example that we wade deeper and follow Christ when we "Patiently Suffer for the Truth's Sake."

John was a living example of the beatitudes. He was poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, he mourned over the sins of God's people. He brought a message of peace and reconciliation with God. He hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and then he was persecuted for the sake of righteousness. The Apostle Peter sums up what followers of Christ should be prepared for.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

(1 Peter 4:12–14)

This is what Peter tells us is the normal life for those who seek to follow Christ.

I want you to take a few moments, in the beauty of silence, to listen to what God has to say to you about following him by following Jesus. Listen to what he is telling you about repentance, about speaking the truth in love, and about patiently suffering for the sake of truth.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2018 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1434-28FC