

Sermon by Bishop Mary Ann Swenson,

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Text: Matthew 10:34-39

May 12, 2000

Was it only two weeks ago when we first came together? If Bishop Kenneth Goodson were here with us today, he would say to us, "I can't remember when we didn't live in Cleveland."

Tuesday before last, we gathered with dancers and banners and African drums in processional. Bishop Bob Morgan invited us to the table. He reminded us that Jesus sets the table. He reminded us that Jesus sets the table for us. That Jesus is the host.

And now today the one who sets the table sends us out to the world and sets us against, with words like, "I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

Just a week ago this morning, Bishop Janice Huie stood before us, reminding us that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. "Remain in me and I in you." Branches don't cut off other branches. She lifted for us a vision, a vision of us as branches of the vine. Resilient in nature, staying connected in love, cleansed from racism and violence and producing fruit that tastes good.

From vine and branches to sword, the same Jesus who said, "I am the vine and you are the branches," also said, "Do not think that I come to bring peace, I come to bring a sword."

How do we understand those words? It's a troublesome passage for me, it's a troublesome at anytime when I read it, but especially today. The sword is an image of war, it speaks violence. All of those Old Testament stories of Joshua and fighting, passage after passage reporting, "He struck with the sword. He struck with the sword. He struck with the sword."

I would rather sing a song from a different text. "And everyone 'neath the vine and fig tree, shall live in peace and unafraid; and into plowshares turn their swords, nations shall learn war no more."

If I have to deal with the sword, I want to turn it into a plowshare. I don't want to consider the sharpness, the cutting, the division and separation. And yet there it is, and if I'm going to learn from Jesus, I must deal with this text.

Now I rest assured because I think that in fact Jesus' use of the image is as an image, not literal. He says clearly (and under extreme pressure in the garden of

Gethsemane), "Put away your sword, those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

And yet, even without a literal image, it is still a difficult picture: father separated from son, daughter separated from mother. Surely we know that the words do reflect how, when they were choosing to follow Jesus in that time in history, it would be a separating from all they had known before. When Jesus said, "Come, follow me," those first disciples left family, left home, left work, left everything behind. Cut themselves off from everything to follow Jesus.

And then Jesus sent them out. He sent them to villages and to preach and he counselled them that if they were rejected in the villages where they went, to let go and leave and shake the dust off of their sandals. Jesus preaches a radical gospel, inspiring and frightening.

And the sharp words that are there in that 10th chapter of Matthew are echoed just two chapters later, when some of the disciples come to Jesus and they say, "Your mother is here to see you." And Jesus responds to them by asking, "Who is my mother, who are my brothers? Those who do the will of God are my mother and my sister and my father and my brother." Jesus himself must have dealt with the personal separation from family in order to stay focused on his mission.

The image of the sword is divisive—and decisive. It cuts through with a clear identity. It's about purpose. It's about allegiance. Jesus set his face to Jerusalem. He cleaned out the temple. He kicked over the tables. He threw out the moneychangers. He said, "Those who are not for me are against me." He was on the edge, the edge of a new thing that God would do in the world through him.

Now this idea of sword as edge, that cleaves between what has been and what is becoming, that's an image of swords that captures my attention. It's an image of sword I can understand. When we say we are born again, aren't we described in the distinct difference between our life before and after knowing Christ? Isn't that what Nicodemus struggled with in his conversation with Jesus, as he was drawn closer to the edge of transformation?

Now in small ways I've known those personal cutting edge moments in my life. There was that evening Camp Wesley Pines in Gallman, Mississippi, when I was 14 years old and I looked at the stars and I wept

and I knew I'd follow Jesus wherever he led, for the rest of my life.

There was the day I left my childhood home in Mississippi to drive west with a new husband and a new life in the unknown. There was the day I walked through the door of the episcopacy.

And then there was a sunny afternoon on the Oregon coast when my husband and I were riding our tandem bicycle. And we had just crested a hill and we looked out at the ocean on the right of us and were beginning to start down the hill. And I looked back and I saw a huge truck with a sign that said "Wide Load." And the truck was pulling half a house. The bicycle began going faster and faster down the hill. I looked over; there was no shoulder, no edge, nowhere to go, and the speedometer was reading 57 miles an hour! Finally, at the bottom of the hill, after being literally on the edge, literally and emotionally and physically on the edge, we got to the bottom of the hill. There was a little pull-out. We pulled over beside the ocean, stopped, watched the truck go by, and I sighed "L'Chayim! To life!"

Cutting-edge moments, like a sword, separating us from what was and opening the door to what will be. When Jesus says, "I come not to bring peace, but a sword," he's saying, "I'm coming to slice into time like a thief in the night." It's a moment for us when God's *kairos* cuts into our *chronos*. The old passes away. The new begins.

Now during this General Conference we have tried to open ourselves to the spirit of God's *kairos*. We have sought to cut ourselves free from traditions that no longer serve the church, from slavery and racism and prejudice and oppression and violence. Cut free: and now sent and set against. "I have come not to bring peace, but a sword."

If you and I are to be disciples of this Jesus, then we must find a way to live faithfully on that edge. It is an edge defined more by questions than answers. Questions with roots that go back to Jesus, especially that sword-like question, "Who do you say that I am?" How do we respond to that question in our time?

On the edge between now and the future, the future remains a mystery. What we do know is that our time is marked by so much rapid change, so many possibilities, and we're thrust into the future before we even know what to do.

Into that time of uncertainty Jesus brings the sword. Author Michael Useem says, "When the future is least clear, leadership is most needed and will make the greatest difference." Let me say it one more time. "When the future is least clear, leadership is most needed and will make the greatest difference." The sword of Christ is also a sword of leadership; leader-

ship within the church, and leadership by the church in the world.

Leaders use these questions to move from the uncertain present to God's clearer future, from where we are to where God is calling us. It means we've got to know first where we are, who we are, to find and to claim our identity as disciples.

I believe God is calling us to the edge, a cutting edge where we can see our purpose clearly. I think too often we're pulled away from the edge by the complexity and the confusion of our world, by the values and the practices of our world.

I think you and I even today need to find within us the leadership to see what is central to who we are as disciples, to see the core of our identity. And then we need to separate that core of our identity from what may be part of our purpose, what may be helpful to our purpose, but what is not really central to our purpose as disciples.

So, what is central? Where do we bring the point of the sword of leadership to bear, both inside the church and in the world? Last year I told my annual conferences that we're not here for each other. The point of the conference, I believe, is not to serve the local churches. And the local church does not exist for its members.

Whether we are the body of Christ called to serve those who are beyond our doors, on the streets, in our neighborhoods, around the world. Every one of us here, every one of us here, is here for the least, for the last, for the marginalized. The center of who we are are all of those who are outside the center. The edge is the core of our purpose.

Oh, but how we wander from that center. Oh, but how often we abandon the core of our mission to pursue other ends.

You know, as a bishop I work day by day at the center of the denomination, and like some of my colleagues, I become frustrated with the abundance of the institutional matters that abound among us. Those institutional matters constantly try to pull me off-center, powerfully vie for my attention. Those of you who know me know that's my greatest struggle.

That is why I made a promise this year. I made a promise that this year I was going to spend a 1,000 hours—now you count it up, that's 20 hours a week—1,000 hours in direct, hands-on service to the poor, the hungry, to children, to those in prison, to refugees. I wanted to go directly, myself, to the edge.

And so this year I've spent nights (*Applause*)—Thank you—I've been spending nights with homeless families. I go and I play with the children while the parents try to make lunches in a church kitchen for the next day. I go down to the shelters and I

help serve the meals at the shelters. I serve food in soup kitchens and at community meals that our churches host. I've gone into the prisons and I've visited at the prisons and I've gone to the youth facilities. I went with one fellow from our conference—one of the lay members of one of our churches—to a prison where he has worked for 40 years. And he is about to retire this year, and he said to me as we were driving out to the prison, "You know, I never thought I would be in a growth industry!" I've gone to all of these places on the edge, and I've seen so many homeless children in our communities.

And in those 1,000 hours, I've tried to use the position of leadership to make visible the need for us to move the center to the edge, and the edge to the center. (*Applause*) Doing this has helped me focus and stay centered myself on who I am as a disciple of Jesus.

And I find myself more than ever leaning out towards the edge—just like I did unintentionally on my bicycle—leaning out towards the edge, passionately on the point of a sword. And even as I prepared to come here to Cleveland, I found myself again drawn back into the busy-ness that all of us have shared before coming. But the sword of Jesus came to me just before I got on the plane.

Our Council Director had sent out an e-mail to people—to all of the people on the conference mailing list—and he had asked them, "If you were going to Cleveland as an investigative reporter, what would you look for when you got there? What would you want to know?" Now, I was amazed to discover all of the replies that came to him. He received over 6 pages of single-spaced, 10-point typed responses.

Now some of those replies were predictable and political. Some were issue-oriented. Some spoke out of concern for our Wesleyan heritage. And, of course, one person wanted to know about changing the rule about the retirement at age 70!

And many were interested in the debates on homosexuality and the possibility of: Would there be a church split? And one person even questioned whether a good reporter would bother with a church meeting of any kind.

Well, more than a few times as I have sat up here among you during these past weeks, and even in the last 24 hours, I've asked some of those questions myself. Why are we here? What are we doing? How will we be different when we go home? How will the world be different because we have spent these two weeks together?

The answer, I think, is in one of the e-mail responses that came, and it's the kind of an answer that I learned when I was sleeping with the homeless families. One of the retired pastors in Wyoming e-mailed to say, "Here's what I would want to know. Do the blind

see? Do the lame walk? Do the poor have the gospel preached to them?"

That's the sword. That's the sword in my heart. Can you feel that *kairos*, that timelessness that cuts through petitions and procedures and wrestling over issues, that cuts to the core of our identity, the center of our mission?

Our identity is Christ's mission in the world, not in any name that we've put on ourselves or on one another. It is that purpose that binds us, that names us, nothing else. No matter what our words have been, no matter how many votes we have taken, if the world is not different because you and I have come here, then it's because you and I have put something other than Christ at the center of our lives.

Jesus comes with a sword. The sword cuts to purpose, to results. And I believe that Jesus is extremely impatient for the results. He is impatient for the results because he is passionate about people. It is a divine, consuming love that cuts to the results. It's that impatience that shows when he says, "Those who put their hand to the plow and look back aren't fit for the kingdom." It's that awareness he has that when we look away from our purpose, we are lost. And he says, "Let the dead bury the dead." It is a radical leadership that God calls us to within the church and in the world.

And still I wrestle with the sword. We have experienced the sword of separation, even divisiveness. It's been painful. Can a difficult text like this give us a message of healing, of grace?

It's helped me to think about the fact that in those days when they really carried swords, that the sword was common—not just as a weapon, but also as an instrument, as a tool to cut firewood for cooking or to chop food or to help roast something over the fire like a shishkebob. It was handy for clearing the brush for a resting place. In other words, the sword was really just like a big Swiss army knife!

And that's to say, it is always two-edged. The edges can cut and separate, *and* create an opening—perhaps an opening for a new path not yet taken, an opening to what is beyond the edge, on the other side.

You know, even more, Jesus says he brings a sword, but perhaps Jesus himself might *be* a sword, cutting us free from the past, from our weaknesses, our errors, opening us to a new future, reborn. Jesus is calling us to himself, to the edge of transformation, inviting us to enter into a new reality that God is creating.

The sword of Christ is a sword that brings change: personally, to the church, and to the world. Kierkegaard said: "From the very beginning, the purpose of Christianity was to change the world." Isn't that what you and I are called to and sent for?

And if we do it, it will disturb us and our world. If the sword is ultimately a sword of change, can we be at peace? If we follow this Jesus, can we carry this sword?

And when we do it, it will set us against the powers and the principalities of our world. It will separate us from the status quo—both inside the church and beyond.

It will create for us a passion for results, a passion for results over rules. It will pull us out on the edge where God is doing a new thing every day to fulfill the divine yearning for kin-dom.

Jesus said, "I come not to bring peace, but a sword." Go then, with the sword of clarity, purpose, leadership, change, and grace.

L'Chayim! To life!