



The Rt. Rev. Kevin S. Brown 236th Annual Convention

SERMON

Below is an abridged version of the sermon given by
Bishop Brown at the 236th Annual Convention.

View complete sermon video [here](#).

Jesus said, “Don’t think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth. I haven’t come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt. 10:34). I offer you these words in the name of the living God, Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Amen.

In the tenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus was speaking to his disciples when he said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Mt. 10:34–36). That’s what scripture says.

That is shocking for anyone to say; if someone is walking down the street and said that to you, that would catch your attention. Here we have the proclaimed Prince of Peace that the angels said was born in the city of David a savior for all ... a savior to bring peace to the earth. Yet he is saying that he was bringing a sword. What’s going on? If

you scratch your head whenever you read this part of Matthew, you are not alone.

Let’s set the stage and get our bearings. Where are we? We are in Matthew, one of the four gospels of Jesus. There are 28 chapters in Matthew, and we’re only at number 10. We’re right where Jesus’ ministry has gotten started. It has gotten off the ground with a huge bang, and he is making quite a stir. For a while, he has been traveling among villages, cities, and the countryside of Judea. He has preached and taught in the synagogues. Time and time again, he has announced the good news of the Kingdom of God, and the crowds are coming. People want to hear what Jesus is all about. This is not some guy just talking to a few friends off in the corner; he is attracting attention, and this was before social media, television, and even Twitter or Instagram. So it was pretty impressive that a guy with no name, a guy with no pedigree, a guy from a little village can draw crowds like that. How is this possible? It’s because of what he has

been saying. He has taught, he has healed the blind, and he's cured lepers.

He calmed the Tempest; he calmed the sea. You'd want to go see this guy too. I know I would. I'd want to hear his great sermons: blessed are the peacemakers for theirs shall be the Kingdom of God; turn the other cheek; store up your treasures in heaven where moth and rust cannot corrupt them; store them with God, for where your treasure is there will your heart be also. That's my kind of creature. You'd better believe I would follow this guy.

By the time of chapter 10, Jesus has already created quite a stir, and now he sends out his 12 disciples on a special mission. He told them to go to the lost sheep because he cannot expect the people to come to him. He told them to preach, saying, "'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal *the* sick, raise *the* dead, cleanse *the* lepers, cast out demons" (Mt. 10:7 - 9). How about that? He told them that they were going into this world to resist evil and to make the world whole.

Jesus was so popular at this time, the crowds followed him everywhere. Soon Matthew tells of the feeding of the five thousand — five thousand people listening to him preach. In John's gospel, we read, "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." That's what I like to quote. What about the Jesus who is the good shepherd and seeks out that lost sheep? What about the Jesus who says I am the way, the truth, and the life.

In the midst of all this popularity as he is preaching about healing, resisting evil,

the good news of God, the Kingdom of God, repenting, and giving yourself over to God, why would he then say that he has not come to bring peace, but he'd come to bring a sword?

I don't believe for a second that Jesus was simply saying he is here to stir up trouble for trouble's own sake or to create strife. I believe that Jesus is saying that he is here to create change and to create new life. Jesus said he is here for a reason, for a purpose, and that is to create change and to create new life.

It's often said and people ask, why Jesus came. The really super-duper short answer people give is that Jesus died for our sins. While this is true, it is such a narrow rendering of the entire ministry of Jesus Christ. Not only did Jesus die for our own sinfulness, Jesus came to wake us up to the way the world ought to be. Jesus came to shake us and awake us. The fundamental implication of what Jesus said is that when we follow Jesus and do what he calls us to do, then sooner or later we find that we are choosing sides.

The action on behalf of love means that we are opting to follow in Jesus's footsteps — or not. That's when Jesus's points come in. When Jesus said, I come to bring a sword, there is a division — a mark in time when our actions have effects in this world. And some folks aren't going to like it; they are going to resist the message of love and the message of peace that Jesus brings. Jesus said that he was bringing peace to the world at all costs to smooth everything out. He came to make the world right. Hence, there will be trouble.

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I think Jesus is basically giving us a little truth in advertising at this point. He's saying, "look guys, you're following me. It's going to get messy because a lot of folks in the world don't want to do what I'm calling you to do."

In the Bible, people in Jesus's own day didn't want him doing what he was doing. When Jesus went out to visit lepers and heal them, the authorities didn't want anything to do with him. Jesus was actually operating outside of the prescribed way for lepers to be healed. He was doing extra work that wasn't supposed to be done. And they turned up their noses at him. When Jesus and his hungry disciples were eating on the Sabbath, the authorities condemned them. Jesus reminded them that man was not created for the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for mankind. As Jesus worked and changed the system, the powers that be didn't want to hear from him.

When we follow Jesus, sooner or later our actions put us in situations where we have chosen sides. This is a shocking thing to hear, because so many of us think of taking sides in terms of a partisan divide, as if the only way to imagine the world is through this limited scope of Democrats and Republicans. I'm not talking about that. We need to set that aside and think big. I'm thinking global. I'm thinking cosmic.

When Jesus says that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, this has cosmic implications. The Collect for Social Justice, which was first printed in the 1928 prayer book so it's about to hit its 100th anniversary, reminds us that we either are going to side

with oppressors, i.e., those who benefit from oppression, or we're going to side with the oppressed. That's what I think Jesus meant. Siding with the aggressors or siding with the oppressed. This can make a lot of people, myself included, feel a little uneasy. What's all this taking sides? I thought we don't take sides — but we sure do.

Again, we are not talking about the tiny world of Democrats and Republicans; think cosmic, think big. We're talking about choosing life; we're talking about choosing love for all of our fellow man. Either we're on the side of the oppressors, or we're on the side of the oppressed, and that's the sword I think Jesus brings to us — and it cuts. Frankly, I think a lot of folks don't want to hear this.

I remember one person in a church where I served, who said, "Father Kevin, I just come to church and want to find some peace. I don't want to be stirred up. I've come to pray for my family, say my prayers, and get communion. I don't want to hear about all of this with the world." I don't think Jesus ever said that he came only to bring peace. Jesus brought a sword — a sword that cuts because it forces action. Jesus forces us to decide and to act.

If you're a fan of the band Rush, you remember the song, *Freewill*. This song has one of my favorite lines in all of rock and roll, "If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice." That is the truth. Jesus is saying that with the sword, not deciding is not an option. There is no way to say, "I simply will not decide." Either we are on

the side of truth and love with our Savior; or whether we like it or not — whether we meant to or not — we find ourselves siding with oppressors.

I'm reminded of a short conversation I had in 2016 with a man I didn't know very well. It was in the weeks following a police killing of a Black man in Charlotte and the protests afterward. We were attending a social event, and we were talking about whether the protesters had a legitimate grievance. He didn't see that they did. That's what he said: "I just don't see it. I don't see their problem. There is no repression." That was the word he used.

That's probably why I remember the conversation. He said he didn't see any repression. I asked him, "Well how do you know?"

He said, "Because I don't see it. I look out, and I see plenty of Black folks who have good jobs with good cars. There are laws on the books that prevent it."

That was all he kept coming back to — the fact that he didn't see it. I wish in that time I had talked to him more. I actually moved on from this conversation to another, but I wished I had asked him even more. I wish I had asked him, "Friend, who else are you talking to? Are there any other eyes with which you are trying to view the situation? Are you just using your own eyes?"

Are we just using our own eyes, or are we trying to see the world, especially something we don't understand? Are we trying to see it through the eyes of others, particularly

those who are calling out and saying they are oppressed?

"I can't see it," he said. Just because we cannot see something doesn't mean it's not there. Jesus constantly made people see what they could not see and what they didn't want to see. Why do you think he physically hung out with tax collectors? Nobody wanted to see tax collectors; they wanted them to be gone. The last thing they wanted to do was highlight them and treat them as any sort of a person with respect. Why do you think Jesus hung out with the lepers? He wanted people to see them, know them, and heal them. Why did Jesus hang out with prostitutes, with the poor, with people possessed by demons — all of those people who were pushed aside, those who we would so often say are oppressed in some way? Jesus was with them because he wants us to see the things that we can't, or sometimes just won't see.

He used that renown he had, that fame that he built up in his day, to draw attention not to himself but to the people he healed. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that absolutely amazing?

We're in a moment in our country of racial awakening and of a powerful reckoning in which so many people have long felt there just isn't any problem anymore because laws are on the books. There can't be a problem because we don't see it. Yet, people who are being oppressed are standing up and saying that there is a problem, and they have been saying this for decades.

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Finally, people are starting to listen. Why? Why are eyes finally opening? Because there's video; because the internet shares it; because the world is now revealing the truth and making it impossible for our eyes to stay closed — unless we choose to.

The racial justice and reconciliation task force was formed specifically and intentionally to help us as a diocese and me as your bishop to see the things we cannot see or don't want to see — to help you, to help clergy, to help parishes, to help everyone open our eyes because none of us sees it all alone. But collectively we may be able to see what it is that God is revealing to us and just hear the truth.

People have said to me, "Bishop my eyes are open, and using the image of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, the scales are falling from my eyes." Others have said, "I just don't want to be part of the problem." That is what this commission is going to help us do: To learn what we don't know, learn what we might have been ignoring, and try to see the world through eyes of others.

Social justice is really a simple concept. It is justice, God's justice, for all. In God's ultimate justice; we don't really need to add social to it, because in the end, God's justice is for all. But we as humans have to remind ourselves that when we talk about God's justice, it's not individual. It's not just about me and my relationship with my Savior. It is about justice for us all — for society, not just individuals.

You know I'm excited even at the end of a year when I'm tired, a year where I have been thinking and fighting pandemic like you have for nine months. I'm excited about this moment of racial awakening in my own life and in the lives of the people across this country. In the depths of emotion this stirs up, I still find that I am hopeful and excited my brothers and sisters, and it's got nothing to do with an election. Remember, don't think so small. I want us in the Episcopal Church in Delaware to get bigger enemies. I don't want us worried about political parties or political platforms. Our enemies, the enemies of Jesus Christ, are forces of oppression, darkness, and evil itself.

Are you with me? I want us to think bigger because when we have the sword of Jesus Christ, we have power to change the world. This is not to be hurled against politicians or parties. It is not for us to determine who is oppressed. If people tell us they are suffering, we must use every ounce of our being to stand up and give voice to them. When the suffering approached Jesus, he did not say they weren't hurting; he listened and asked how he could help.

The sword of Jesus Christ is a sword of healing. Following the way of Jesus Christ was never, ever meant to be a spectator sport. We suit up, and we get to work. We must pray. We must act. We must be Mary and Martha. When we do act, we choose. Being baptized in the water of Jesus Christ is not a passive life — not for the faint of heart, but it's a life worth living. It's rich, it matters, it's cosmic.