



# Church as Circus

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Brookside Community Church

Pentecost 3A – Matthew 10:24–39

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*God's empowers us to risk following Jesus beyond our places of comfort, to bluntly confront the power of death so that it can be exposed and defied.*

## **Billy and the Circus**

In 1908, to celebrate Ringling Brother's 25<sup>th</sup> year open as a circus, a French woman named Mlle. La Belle Roche performed a new act called "the Thriller." Before cars were even popular, La Belle Roche decided to use the automobile to do a "death defying" stunt. The advertisement read:

*Ringling Bros [presents the] last and latest, best and greatest of all the world's sensations. The death defying, hazardous, terrific, blood-chilling, danger-courting, automobile double somersault performed at a terrible height and followed by a downward plunge of awful speed. Out-thrilling all other "thrillers," performed by the Intrepid Mlle. La Belle Roche.*

Have you ever been to a circus? What is so captivating about them? There are many things about circuses that I despise. Least of all is the way they treat animals. Circus animals are confined virtually all of their lives in barren conditions, while forced to suffer extreme physical and psychological deprivation. Still, there is one thing that I find extremely fascinating about circuses: the way that they a complete mockery of the powers of death!

At the height of his career, Clyde Beatty, the famous Lyon tamer, had *forty* tigers and lions performing in one arena. The Wallendas were not content with just walking on the high wire one person at a time. Instead, they decided to cross the high wire seven people at once together in pyramid formation.

During the time in America that circuses were at their peak, little Billy really loved the circus. He loved circuses so much that he carried around with him this little toy circus wagon with little wooden animals. When he died, his scrap book contained a newspaper clipping of him as a boy riding a circus elephant. Little Billy grew up to be the famous Harlem human rights lawyer and civil rights activist of the 1960s named William Stringfellow. Though he was a lawyer, he is perhaps most famous for his work as a theologian. The main thesis he carried in all of his work was to point out that systemic evil is articulated in the Bible—especially the New Testament—as "powers and principalities," or the "Power of Death." He argued that what it meant to be a faithful follower of Jesus was to declare yourself to be free from the spiritual forces of death and destruction and to submit yourself single-heartedly to the power of life.

William Stringfellow argued that in many ways, the circus does what the Church is called to do, to confront the power of death that operates in the world so that it can be exposed and defied. We are to expose the way the world truly is while living as pioneers of the world as God calls it to be. We are to be pioneers of the Kingdom.

## Schweitzer's Thesis

Our Passage today comes just after one of the verses that have been key for New Testament scholarship in debates about the historical Jesus. Matthew 10:23 says, “When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Human One comes.” For over one hundred years, the meaning of this particular passage has been at the center of debates about how to read the book of Matthew.

In 1906 (just a year or two before Mlle. La Belle Roche's automobile trick at the Ringling Circus), a NT and Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer made an argument that stopped other scholars in their tracks. He zeroed in on that verse—that Jesus was sending the disciples would be persecuted, but that Jesus believed the Kingdom would come before the disciples returned. When they didn't, Schweitzer argued, this led Jesus to live out the inauguration of the Kingdom himself, requiring him to go to Jerusalem and die. Thus, he made an argument that Jesus believed the literal and immediate end of the world was coming, and that this emphasis on the end of the world was so important to Jesus that it was at the core of everything Jesus preached and did. While I'm clearly not as skilled of a scholar as Schweitzer was, I think there were some important things that Schweitzer's thesis misses in his characterization of the Kingdom of God.

In theology, the end of the world is known as the *eschaton*, and the study of the end of the world and the conclusions one comes to about the *eschaton* is known as *eschatology*. Schweitzer's argument is known as the old “thoroughgoing eschatology” thesis. On a basic level, I agree with Schweitzer's thesis, that everything that Jesus taught and did was rooted in his belief in the imminent arrival of Kingdom of Heaven. (By imminent here, I mean impending. For good reason, I guess, I often confuse with immanent, meaning within.) I think Matthew's Jesus *was* looking for the end of the *old* world because Jesus was inaugurating a *new* one. Jesus' ultimate agenda was discipleship—which is synonymous with a way of living in the world that necessitates costly political engagement. Discipleship is all about the inauguration of a new world. Discipleship is nothing if it is not about transformation. By the way they live in the world, disciples are to expose the way the world truly. They are to live as pioneers of the world as God calls it to be—they are to be pioneers of the Kingdom.

## The Disciple is Not Above the Teacher

Jesus tells his disciples clearly that “the disciple is not about the teacher.” This is, perhaps, one of the most important passages in the New Testament. Jesus makes clear that the conflict between him and the religious and political elite is only going to get worse, and that the disciples are then to follow Jesus into this conflict. This does not sound like the comforting Jesus that most of us have grown up with. Rather, it sounds more like those radicals who leave home to join the death-defying circus.

We have been reading Matthew for a while now. Matthew opens up with this conflict between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdoms of the World. John the Baptist shouts, “The Kingdom of Heaven is here—and that changes everything.” Jesus' is baptized and hears the voice declaring he is

God's beloved, and then goes about proclaiming the same to the outcasts of the world. Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount and charts this alternative community. Jesus then goes about acting as an "alternative boundary keeper," going to people who were sick and outcasts and restoring them to life and wholeness. But here is the thing to remember, which we have discovered over the last few weeks. This is how Matthew scholar Warren Carter puts it, "Generally, the world does not welcome its challenge and alternative." If we go about living as an alternative community, we should not expect the world to be comfortable with it.

Jesus' message was a threat to those who benefited from the world as it is. So he doesn't get too far before he finds himself in direct conflict with them... and as we read further in to the story, this conflict gets worse.

"The disciple is not above the teacher," Jesus said. "They demonized me, they will demonize you. They flogged me, they will do the same to you. BUT DO NOT FEAR THEM. FEAR GOD..."

Here is my question, and today's message is really about this question. Is this what you have been taught all along about the gospel? Is this what we have generally understood the gospel to be? We come to church to find comfort, don't we? Nevertheless, the teaching of Jesus today tells us that we are called to go out into the world and engage it, offering an alternative, offering restoration, wholeness, life, and peace. And this job may be dangerous. It killed Jesus, should we not expect that following the teachings of Jesus means risking our lives?

Is this what we have heard? Is this what we have been told? Still, this is what the text is telling us.

If we want to follow Jesus, but we are not willing to see the divisions we are up against, not willing to follow when it gets dangerous, then maybe we have not been listening to Jesus' teachings but something else. We are supposed to live as pioneers of the world the way that God calls it to be. We are pioneers as the Kingdom. And the way we live in the world is supposed to expose it for the death-dealing place it is so that it will know and seek the life it is supposed to have. We are supposed to live in the face of death.

Maybe Stringfellow is right. Maybe the church is like a circus. Maybe we are called to perform death-defying acts so that we can expose the power of death out in the world and transcend it. To offer life to a world that doesn't know there is anything out there other than death.

The circus is an eschatological parable. The church is supposed to be an example as the world God calls the world to be. Stringfellow says that the church is an eschatological parody of the conventional society in the world as it is. In the circus, the risk of death is bluntly confronted, and the power of death is exposed and defied. The circus reminds us of what the church is called to do, to "openly, dramatically, and humanly portray the pervasiveness of the power of death in the midst of our everyday life."

I don't think that means we are supposed to get in cars and do summersaults, to live as Evil Kenievals and risk ourselves pointlessly, as if God likes it when we suffer. It means that when we see people hurting, we offer them healing and restoration, regardless of what people will say. And we should know, if we do our job well, we should expect some pushback. We may even see it get worse than that.

Like the circus, the church is called to expose the world as it truly is, while pioneering the world as it is called to be. We are called to be pioneers of the Kingdom.