

August 21, 2022

12. Letting Go of Violent Responses — **Matthew 26:47–56, NRSV**

Of the three synoptic gospel writers, Mark and Matthew tend to favor a straightforward narrative of what Jesus said and did, while Luke is sometimes the odd man out. As an editor, Luke feels free to add and subtract items from the narrative, especially when they reinforce his major themes, such as “Jesus, friend of sinners.”

Luke sometimes complicates what seems like a well-defined idea, like “put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52b). In Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells the disciples to take up a sword, seemingly reversing his earlier instructions to his followers as traveling evangelists: “But now, let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one” (Luke 22:36). This seems at odds with the above verse from Matthew and another in Luke’s gospel, where Jesus tells his sword-wielding follower, “No more of this!” (22:51).

Commentators have been greatly challenged by this apparent about-face. In *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, notes this about Luke 22:36:

The *sword* apparently meant to Jesus a preparation to live by one’s own resources against hostility. The natural meaning of vs. 38 is that the disciples supposed he spoke of an actual sword, only to learn that two swords were sufficient for the whole enterprise, i.e., were not to be used at all.¹

This falls a bit short of completely clarifying the passage, but perhaps we can connect it with passages that seem to challenge Peter’s commitment to follow Jesus even unto death.

Perhaps Jesus is talking about spiritual warfare, as in Luke 22:31 when Jesus tells Peter, “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat.” This might help make sense of a “spiritual” sword. Another connection also suggested itself to me. What if, in some complicated metaphorical way, this is a reference to God’s test of Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac to the Lord (Genesis 22:1–19)?

In Genesis 22:7–8, Abraham and Isaac walk toward the place of sacrifice, and Isaac asks, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham, who is carrying fire and a knife, replies, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” In some metaphorical sense, perhaps Peter is replaying the Abraham role, ready to show his faith by fighting for Jesus to the death, while in the larger context, God is indeed providing the lamb for sacrifice.

¹. Bruce M. Metzger, Ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 1279.

- It appears that when we delve deeper into any scriptural idea, we find ourselves confronted with a mystery. What reasons can we suggest for the theological complications that we find in Scripture, especially when comparing passages in diverse books?
- What other reasons might we suggest for Jesus' encouragements to his disciples to carry swords (supposing that our Savior was not in favor of a rumble)? If Jesus was testing his disciples, did they pass the test, or learn something of lasting importance?
- Are analogies such as Peter/Abraham and Jesus/Isaac useful? When should we be ready to scrap them and start over?

—Kevin McCabe

kmccabe57@hotmail.com



Kevin McCabe is a writer, poet, and retired teacher. He was an instructor in Classics at several universities and has written and edited two books on Lucy Maud Montgomery and several works on the history and literature of the Niagara Peninsula. Kevin is a member of Grace Mennonite Church in St. Catharines, Ontario, where he lives with his wife and daughters.

Resources for this session

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