

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

If we think back to last Sunday's gospel lesson, we will recall that Jesus had been at a dinner at the home of a Pharisee, and his remarks were addressed to the small group gathered for that occasion. In this week's reading, he is addressing large crowds. "The fact that they are traveling with him demonstrates their infectious enthusiasm. His message to them is the same as to the earlier dinner group. God demands first place in our lives and that kind of discipleship is costly."

Because Christianity has been associated historically with "family values," this passage comes as quite a shock.

To be told to hate your parents, your spouse and children, and your siblings seems more than harsh---- it borders on the absurd. To hate oneself can seem a very unlikely thing for a preacher trying to attract a following to suggest. But when we get to the part about being prepared for a shameful death, then we begin to understand where Jesus is going with this declaration.

And Jesus uses two picture ideas to reinforce his message: *the tower and the battle*. The first is a reference to the greatest building project of the time, the Temple in Jerusalem. And we know in looking back on that period, that it was soon to be utterly destroyed. The second image refers to the Romans occupying Palestine. Given their overwhelming power advantage, it was certainly wiser to seek peace with Rome, *not war*.

And, indeed, we know that the Jews would go on to be defeated when they actually took up arms against Rome. They lost everything: their capital city, their temple, and their ancestral residence (for they would then be scattered to the far corners of the earth). His warning about salt losing its ability to provide flavor is meant to be an ultimate challenge to Israel as a whole. In this period of crisis at the time when Jesus was carrying out his ministry is a turning-point: they "must face the ruin of the *tower* and the devastation of *battle*."

Let me provide a bit more context by looking at the actual language in the text.

The word "hate" is a Semitic expression meaning "to turn away from, to detach oneself from" and does not have the animosity-laden meaning we often ascribe to it. However, it also tells us something about how the people of Jesus' time used hyperbole, particularly in

Aramaic, to make a point. In this context, “hate” doesn’t mean to develop an intense dislike for family members but is rather a call to love them less than Christ.

Additionally, there is the whole question of whether or not Jesus is here talking about people being truly unable to do something vs. those who are *able* but *unwilling*. It is interesting to consider the passage in light of the former of these two options.

For example, it could be that here Jesus is focusing on a large crowd of those who have joined in the general group of followers. These aren’t people whom Jesus has called but rather those who approach him wanting to follow him. This gives the words which can sound harsh a slightly different emphasis. Perhaps Jesus is asking if they have the strength to follow him. In Luke, crowds are frequently depicted as groups of neutral persons from whom he might choose disciples, while at the same time he may have felt that it was unwise to be overly sanguine about the degree to which they could realize their potential as such.

It is also important to take into consideration the cultural context. For example, in some locations and in some periods of time, “one’s identity could be so wrapped up in pleasing (or even rebelling against) the family that the person has no real self-identity.” The person’s identity is determined by the family. In this sense, Jesus may be indicating that he doesn’t want disciples who are people “who just go along with the crowd but rather (those who are) truly committed followers.” Also, we can only truly understand “the severity of the passage” by viewing it in the context of “the primacy of filial relationships” in the first century. Individuals had no real existence apart from family. If you didn’t belong to a family, you had no social existence at all. Jesus then is actually “confronting the social structures that governed his society at their core.”

Another way of putting it would be to say that he is “*deconstructing* the conventional family” of the time. We can see this in the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example. “The old family, the old order, will have to be broken and then fixed. That’s the way the cross intersects with our lives. They have to be broken and made whole again. In the Eucharist the bread is broken and then distributed. ‘This is my body broken for you.’ ...We need to go from hating mother, father, brother, sister to the story of the Prodigal Son in which relationships are redefined. As one authority puts it, “Jesus was challenging us to go

beyond traditional family values because...some people are left out of the families of our choosing.

The family of God that Jesus came to invite us into does not leave anyone out. In fact, it especially goes out to invite those who are usually left out, the sick and the poor, et al.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, we are clearly dealing with the overarching theme of how we relate to our possessions. Jesus said, “none can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” In the narrative about the Prodigal, our sinfulness is traced directly back to the problems we have with possessions. “The younger son demands his share of his father’s possessions. He wants to possess his Father’s very Being. The father divides up his life into two parts and gives it to the two sons. The elder one does not turn down his share but treats it as something he has earned so that he too has clung to his father’s life as a possession rather than receiving it as a gift.”

Thus, perhaps we could say that the younger son acts in hatred toward his father, losing everything in the process, but then repents because his sin is so visible and so threatening to his very survival. The older son never comes to hate his father, but he deludes himself into believing he has always been the faithful, loving son. He can’t repent, however, because he never sinned against the father. Notice then how all of the relationships here are broken up before they can be put back together again, before there can be healing. And how much of this story concerns our excessive attachment to possessions at the expense of everything else in life that has so much more lasting value? Jesus says we need to give this up or it will destroy us.

To fully appreciate what Jesus is saying here, perhaps we should concentrate more on how we see discipleship in our own culture *today*. It’s easy to say that being a Christian today is difficult because we are challenged on every side by a secular culture which does not value what believers value. But what this should really prompt us to do is to examine the extent to which Christianity has *always* been truly counter-cultural. Thus, what Christ is asking of us is *far more difficult* than we usually consider it to be. It is a “radical, counter-cultural vision of discipleship” which informs this whole passage from Luke. And in the history of the church, that very counter-cultural meaning is what inspired movements like monasticism --- still perhaps “more powerful than any other form of resistance to mainstream society we have seen in the (history of the) West.”

To see what I mean by this, consider this: that the monks who went to the desert in the early days of the church “were not escaping the temptations of the real world but seeking to be more attentive to our frequently chaotic and uncharitable impulses by removing distractions that divert our attention from the stirrings of our own soul.” This is not escape so much as it is acceptance that “by entering into the messy situation of living in the close quarters of a monastery” they could more easily “come to know and imitate God’s forbearing love.” Life in a monastery is not “mere co-existence achieved through learning to grit one’s teeth and bite one’s tongue.” It is “discovering how intertwined our lives are with fellow sinners in Christ’s body.”

Jesus tells his followers that they should take up their cross if they wish to follow him, but we need to hear these words in full knowledge that they were committed to writing many years after the ministry of Jesus to Christians who knew what cross-bearing meant. Persecution had begun, and Christians were dying on crosses. For the person desiring casual discipleship, Jesus’ words would be discouraging. But for Luke’s church, actively experiencing persecution, these were words which ratified the sacrifices they were making. **Almighty God, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen**

Sources

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