

Jeremiah 18:1-11
Luke 14:25-33
“More Than Family”

September 8, 2019

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

This is one of those moments when I don't much like Jesus, when I find him confusing. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate...” I've never thought of Jesus as laying down ultimatums before, least of all ultimatums that require me to choose between him and the family I love. But that's what he says, “You can't be with me and her.” Actually, that's not quite what Jesus says. If that is all Jesus said, we'd still call him brash, but at least it might be the sage advice of a marriage counselor. “You can't get married and still live at your parents' house.” How many moms and dads found themselves saying something like this last week? “You can't go to kindergarten and also stay home with me. You've got to get on that bus! With me, it's all or nothing.” But that's not what Jesus says. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

It sounds so cruel and arrogant that, when I first read it, I had to read it again. Wait a minute, this isn't the same little Lord Jesus we sing about at Christmas, is it? The one who lays down his sweet head on the hay, and no crying he makes? Where's the Jesus who took babies to his knee, who treated the drunks and sinners like *they* were family? Wasn't it Jesus who also said, “You cannot love God if you *don't* love your brother or sister?” But now, “Whoever comes to me and does not *hate* brother and sister.”

Psychologists and medical doctors have been telling us for years that it takes twice as much energy to hold a grudge than it does to let one go. Twice as much muscle strength to make a frown than to cut a smile. That it's twice as debilitating to our mind, body, and spirit to let hate fester than to try and stop it. So, when I hear Jesus speak of hate, I have to think carefully about the things I'm willing to spend twice on.

I mean, I hate racism. I hate classicism. I hate despair of any kind, which is a total loss of hope. I hate stopped up ears and small minds that refuse to hear stories other than their own. I hate it when I'm stopped at an intersection waiting to turn left, and I want to let the car that is sitting there waiting to turn out go first, and a car whips around and

passes me on the right, and nearly hits the other car. I hate that. Because I hate that we are in such a rush to get everywhere these days. I hate indifference to the poor. But hate my mom and dad, my wife and kids? What's Jesus offering that is so valuable I'd be willing to do what he says here, to hate my family and go off with him instead?

If ever there was a case for the importance of understanding context, for not just picking up our Bibles and reading what suits our fancy, this would be it. Is Jesus calling us to hate our family? Clearly not. What Jesus is calling on us to do is to think carefully about the power and placement of metaphors in our lives. Allow me to explain.

If I were to ask you right now to shout out answers to the question, "What is family," how many answers would we get? I'm willing to bet we'd get more than one. If I were to ask you, "What is a church?" I'm willing to bet we'd get more than one answer to this question as well, and that at least one answer would be, "Family. Church is family." And, depending upon your definition and experience of family, that might be a good answer. Or it might not. You see what I'm getting at?

I have been reading a classic lately: "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*," by Harriet Beecher Stowe. She wrote it in 1852, 9 years before the American Civil War and over 100 years before the passage of Civil Rights legislation. I'm about half-way through the book, which is where you meet Augustine St. Clare, a white plantation owner and slave master in New Orleans. St. Clare, as he is simply called in the book, is married to Marie, a sickly woman who has never traveled outside the south, and whose opinion of slavery is summed up in a single statement: "At all costs, I'm thankful I'm born where slavery exists; and I believe it's right—indeed, I feel it must be; and, at any rate, I'm sure I couldn't get along without it."

Together, St. Clare and Marie have a young daughter, Eva, who is cared for less by her own mother and more by a black slave woman whom Eva calls Mammy. In one poignant scene, Marie is trying to fulfill what she sees as her motherly responsibilities by instilling in her daughter an understanding of right and wrong.

"You see Eva, it's always right and proper to be kind to servants, but it isn't proper to treat them just as we would our *family*, or people in our own class of life. Now, if Mammy was sick, you wouldn't want to put her in your own bed."

"I should feel [like doing that very thing], mamma," said Eva, "because then it would be handier to care for Mammy, and because, you know, my bed is better than hers."

Marie, who finds her daughter's response utterly intolerable and empty of all morals, turns to her sister-in-law, who is visiting from Vermont, and cries, "What can I do to make this child understand me?"

To which her sister-in-law replies, "Nothing."¹

You see what I'm getting at? Marie will mourn the fact that she did not think to get to her daughter first, to give her an understanding of family that would be sure to exclude the likes of Mammy. No doubt, Marie will still try. But if what we've heard is true, that hatred isn't something we're born with, but rather something we are taught, the good news may be that we can also give our children a new metaphor for family, and teach them that family is compassion and humanity.

Joseph Campbell once said, "If you want to change the world, change the metaphor." So if you think it's guns and mass shootings, think again. Or if you think it's migrants and illegal immigrants, you're quite mistaken. If you think it's black and white, perhaps not. It's about a world that has ceased to care, about a people who have forgotten we belong to one another.

Let me put it to us this way: when Jesus talks about family, he also talks about a builder who sets out to build something and realizes halfway through the project that he doesn't have what it takes to finish the project. He runs out of money, which means he runs out of supplies, and now all he's left with is this *thing* that makes people look and laugh, and say, what a fool to waste so much.

And Jesus also talks about a king who decides to wage war with another king, only the first king doesn't correctly calculate what it will take—how many soldiers and weapons he'll need—to win the war. Luckily in this case, the king realizes this before it's too late, and he sends word to the other king that it would be better to make peace than war today, because the cost of war will be too great.

Family, buildings, and war. What's the connection? That we can, and often do, use all three to create a name for ourselves. And we ought to be careful about how we do this, because on the one hand, we can spend half our lives working to become something only to wake up one day and discover it's killing us to maintain ourselves. We are not at all who

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we thought we'd be, or the good creation God intended us to be. This can happen as much to individuals as it can to whole communities, and especially to churches, because we have such a strong attraction to be like family, and we tend to be known by our physical location and the look of our buildings.

On the other hand, there are people who spend half their lives trying to get away from family, or searching out a new family. But they walk into church buildings and discover, that's all it is—just a building with no family.

I thought about this, and about which kind of people we might be this morning, and I remembered the word of God to the prophet Jeremiah: *"Am I not the potter, and are you not the clay? You are in my hand, and I am still working on you."*²

This may be the best news of all, that whoever you are, whatever you've become, God is still working on you. Even if you're feeling like a no one this morning; like you're lying on the ground in a thousand shattered pieces, exhausted by who you've become, God is still working on you. Even if your heart is so full of hate and anger that you find yourself pushing the world away, God is still working on you, so that you might become a new creation, completed by love.

There's a story the Bible tells about what will happen on the day God comes to judge the earth for the last time. God will look out over all the kingdoms we have built, and separating some to the left and some to the right, God will then ask the same question of everyone: What did you do for the least?

My friends, when the curtain closes and the last switch is thrown, and everything we've worked so hard to become has been laid in the grave, let it be said that we have lived our lives in such a way that we don't have to hang our heads in shame.

² *Italics* my translation.