

Pentecost 15C 2010

Proper 18

Texts: Jeremiah 18:1-11

Psalm 139:1-5, 13-17

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Luke 14:26

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

I knew we were having a baptism today long before I had read the lessons for this morning. I have to be honest and tell you that when I did read the gospel for this morning I rolled my eyes and thought to myself, “This is just great! I am baptizing a child and I am reading all about hating your family. And Keith thinks he is the only one who gets the tricky scriptures to preach on! Yeesh.”

But then I came to a very different conclusion. This is actually one of the very best lessons to preach on for a baptism and hopefully, by the end of the sermon, you’ll know why.

When I was a little girl I remember hearing this passage in church and being very confused by it. After all, didn’t the Ten Commandments say to honor your Father and Mother? Wasn’t Jesus always telling us to love one another, to love even our enemies and those who wish us harm? Where did all this hating your family come in?

Just as it sounded rather odd to me sitting in the pew at church I can just imagine it sounding a bit bizarre to the crowd that was following Jesus that day. I can just see people turning to each other and saying, “What did he just say?” “Did I hear him correctly?” “How did we get from being invited to a banquet (which is where this story takes place), to carrying a cross?”

How did we get there, indeed.

Luke writes poignantly about Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. After the infancy narratives he describes Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. From Galilee

Luke follows Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, which ends with his crucifixion and resurrection. And smack dab in the middle, between Jesus' ministry in Galilee and his ministry in Jerusalem, is our text for today.

Smack dab in the middle of Jesus' ministry Jesus starts speaking about our ministry and what it will take for us to be disciples. Luke places this in the middle of his gospel because discipleship is at the heart of Luke's story.

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

In New Testament times the family was the nucleus that life revolved around. To dishonor one's family could result in expulsion from the community, which could imperil one's survival. For the gathered crowd to hear Jesus say that we should hate our family members, even life itself, was very jarring.

But to hate one's family did not mean and would not have been heard by Jesus' listeners as a call to emotionally loathe or despise those they were related to.

The word “hate” comes from a Semitic expression meaning to detach, to set aside from or turn away from. It was not an emotion, but rather an action that Jesus was calling them to.

Jesus was saying, “Above everything, above family, above friends, above anything the dominant culture says should take first place in your life, I am to be there. I am to be first.” This was and remains a very counter-cultural claim. This is dangerous stuff, hard stuff.

But in placing Jesus first, Jesus wanted them and us to know that there is a tremendous cost in following him. Just as Jesus travels to Jerusalem, travels to the cross, so too we need to know before we commit our lives to him that we will be traveling towards the cross as well.

Jesus' message is not a smooth sell. It is not some slick advertising campaign that is trying to convince us we need something more in our lives. Jesus' message is not some con job making promises it can't possibly keep ignoring the hardship and glossing over the true cost of discipleship. Jesus loves us enough to lay the truth in front of us and to let us choose.

John, Melinda, Fred and Chinkie, in the act of baptism, what you are doing here in the place of and for Klara is saying that you understand this. You are standing up before God and God's people and saying that you know that baptism brings joys, hardship, responsibilities and expectations.

Baptism is not just some religious rite of passage; it is the initiation into the family of God. It is to bring forth and enter into a relationship that is to be first and foremost in your lives and in Klara's. Baptism is no less than allowing God to claim your life.

To follow Jesus, to become a disciple, is to make our relationship with God our primary relationship. It is to see, experience, and redefine all our other relationships through our relationship with him. To follow Jesus means that we are willing to leave behind our old lives and relationships and to take on new ones because at the heart of discipleship is transformation.¹

It is easy perhaps to place Jesus first in our not so good relationships, but to place him first in our best relationships? That is much harder but very necessary. If we don't place Jesus first we run the risk of worshipping someone or something else.

Our society is filled with examples of people and cultures that worship everything from money and the way of life it can purchase for us, to technology, sports, country...the examples could go on and on.

When we place these things first in importance we fall into an idolatrous relationship that cannot give us what Jesus can. Jesus tells us that he is

¹ Feasting on the Word Year C vol. 4. Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor eds. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010) p. 48

to be first in all our relationships, first in our friendships, first in our families and first in our faith.

We may lose family over our choice. We may lose friends, status, even our very lives. But to follow the true King is to understand and accept this and to follow Jesus anyway. It is to follow him with our eyes and our hearts wide open. This is the cost of discipleship.

But there is joy in discipleship. Right after Jesus tells about the cost of discipleship, at the very beginning of the next chapter we read what Fred Craddock calls “The Three Parables of Joy.”² These are the parables of the Found Sheep, the Found Coin, and the Found Son.

Immediately after we are told we must give up everything to follow Jesus we read about being found. We read about the extravagant efforts made on our behalf and of the extravagant joy that is experienced in heaven as a result.

In each parable what is lost is sought after until it is found, until it is returned home to the one who cares for it best. In these parables we are told that we are sought after and claimed by the one who risked everything, who gave up everything, even his own life for us. Jesus knew the cost of loving us and he chose to love us anyway.

Jesus is telling us that there is joy in putting him first and in following him, joy beyond anything we could imagine. That joy will always find and embrace us even as we are called to embrace a discipleship rooted in self-renunciation and in letting go. There is joy in discipleship because discipleship is nothing less than choosing to enter into God’s love and God’s grace.

Amen.

² Fred Craddock. Luke. Interpretation Series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990).

