Pentecost 18, Year C All Saints Peterborough “Hate your parents!?”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us how to become his disciple in 3 simple steps; we must: 1-Reject our parents, siblings, spouse and children

2-Give away everything we have, and 3-Be ready to suffer and die at any moment. Not very tempting, and very rarely followed, except by maybe a few saints like Francis or Clare. I would imagine most of us do not exactly strive for these goals and we certainly don’t hope our children will follow this path!

So, why is the Lord of love, whose primary teaching is to “love one another”, telling us to “hate” our families? And why is our Savior- who embraces and heals, feeds meals and tells stories, who holds children on his lap- why is this same person who blesses lives, encouraging us to “hate” even life itself?

Whenever Jesus sounds harsh or obtuse, you always know he’s trying to stir people up, trying to get us to understand something in a new way. In the chapters leading up to this passage, Jesus has been in a growing tension with the Pharisees and Jewish elders. Several times he has been disgusted that they were angry with him for supposedly breaking the law by healing someone on the Sabbath. He repeatedly calls them out for hypocrisy and missing the point of their faith. Following the passage we heard today, Jesus tells three parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son, reminding the elders that their often prideful efforts to be perfect and sinless are not as pleasing to God as just one sinner who humbly repents, one lost soul who comes home- for in God’s justice, he says, “the first will be last and the last will be first”.

In Hebrew poetry like the psalms, and in the rhetorical style of Jesus’ day, extreme contrasts of opposites were often used to emphasize a point. “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their lives for Jesus’ sake will save it.” If you love one thing, then you must reject its competition. If you store up treasure on earth, then you can’t have treasure in heaven. If you love and follow Jesus, you must hate your family and leave them behind.

For most of us, taken literally, this seems impossible and even immoral. But actually I think the impossibility of being a perfect disciple is part of the point. Jesus wants the Pharisees to realize that they cannot be perfect, no matter how hard they try to follow every one of the 413 laws of the Torah. He wants us each to admit to ourselves that we cannot be Godly and pure by our own efforts. As human beings we all struggle and suffer and sin. Until we accept this truth about ourselves with honesty and humility, we won’t fully understand, we won’t know in our gut, that we absolutely need God and it’s okay to rest in God’s arms like a child, to trust in God’s forgiveness and love.

We have a savior; we are not responsible for earning our own salvation; we don’t need to be ashamed of our lack of perfection. God gives forgiving love and wise guidance, because by ourselves we will always miss the point of what is most important. This is why Jesus says we must enter the kingdom like a little child. Children don’t live in the illusion that they can do everything for themselves; they are aware of their dependence on others. It’s in accepting this humbling truth of our need for God’s love that we can actually grow in kindness and patience and compassion for others and for ourselves.

When we’re not worried and striving constantly to prove ourselves worthy, we can let go of our attachment to rules and standards and judgments. Then we can open our hearts more fully and see the hopelessness in the neighbor who struggles with addiction, or the depression in the angry boss, or the loneliness in the rebellious teenager. Then we can begin to know how to feel and give love to those who need it the most. Instead of judging or fearing them, we recognize that we also have anger and confusion, we also feel sad and lonely; we’re not so different from them. This connection makes it possible for us to follow Jesus’ most important command- to give love to one another, even those most difficult to love because they need love the most.

So, that brings us back around to this really upsetting and pointed statement about “hating” our father and mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, and ultimately life itself. Even given the rhetorical use of the word “hate” as an exaggerated contrast, it’s a harsh statement that to love and follow Jesus we must reject those we are closest to.

At first I thought it was pretty ironic that as a family therapist I was assigned this passage on my first Sunday preaching at All Saints! But then I got to thinking about many of my clients and even my own family stories. As we grow up, we all need to find who we are, who God made us to be, as separate from our parents. Even the most loving, supportive parents must still be put into their proper place in our lives if we are to become self-supporting, functioning adults who can have healthy, mature relationships of our own.

And many people have parents or family members who do not know how to love very well, or in fact whose way of relating is damaging and hurtful, sometimes even violent and hateful. These difficult family members may ultimately be accepted with their limitations, but we who have been hurt or abused must also find ways to protect ourselves, to set boundaries on our interactions with the hurtful people in our lives. Many people’s suffering is directly related to their parents and siblings, and we often recreate and pass on the hurt we have experienced to our own spouses and children. For this to change, we must learn healthier ways of giving and receiving. This is why people come to family therapy! ☺

In offering us discipleship, Jesus shows us how our relationships can be healed. If we come to know God as a wise and unconditionally loving parent; if Jesus is our faithful friend and brother; if the Holy Spirit within and among us is our source of strength and health, then we can build trust in a truer form of love than our families could give. Then we might grow beyond a cycle of hurt or fearful dependence, and be able to create a loving human family or caring friendship community of our own. This is part of what we mean when we talk about our “church family”-- one in which we’re loved and accepted just as we are.

So, in telling us to put our families and possessions aside, Jesus guides us to lay down the things we’ve hid behind, and be free to be loved and give love in a new way. In discipleship we are accepted and valued for who we are inside-- not for what we have, not for what we earn, not for who we’re related to. It is very hard, letting go of the people and things which have given us security. Yet Jesus’ invitation to put them away is an invitation to a life of freedom. We are free to be our truest selves and therefore to follow Jesus in loving all others generously - not because we owe them as family, but because they need care and forgiveness and because we feel connection and compassion. **“Thanks be to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine!”** Amen.