

Genesis 21:8-21
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

Family therapists and clinical psychologists and licensed clinical social workers are earning six figure incomes these days trying to help families how to function in healthy ways. It's a booming business! The object of the exercise is to help everyone reach their own full potential and at the same time stay in relationship with one another. Not an easy task to be sure. There is a novel concept about families that floats around among these clinicians that says that the family exists for the benefit of the individual not that the individual exists for the benefit of the family. Boundaries, growing pains, separation issues, wounded hearts and souls all reside in the family as each person works their way toward being a fully functioning and healthy adult. What we learn in our families about how life works and how relationships should go is what we take with us in our adult lives. And sometimes, we discover that we have lots to 'unlearn.'

So what is Jesus talking about this morning as he prepares his disciples for the mission that lies ahead? Isn't Jesus supposed to be encouraging love and forgiveness and family unity? Well, only partially it seems. These statements by Jesus this morning sound pretty harsh and pretty anti-family, but we know that Jesus treasures relationships and helps people learn how to develop and nurture them. Why would Jesus say to his disciples, "Anyone who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." and "Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."? Those are the kinds of statements that would tempt us to turn a deaf ear to Jesus.

So what *does* Jesus mean? What is he referring to? He's already told the disciples to leave their families and follow him...and they have. It's entirely possible, given their work and the travelling they are doing that they may never again see their families of origin. It's kind of like your children moving to the west coast right after the Civil War. They might as well have died because in all likelihood you would never see them again. Permanent earthly separation has the same effect on relationships that actual death has. They fade in memory. The disciples have already made this decision when they decided to follow Jesus. Now Jesus is preparing them for their mission: work that will put them in harm's way with the powers that be. And they will have to do it without Jesus' physical presence. They will be in the crosshairs of every Temple and Synagogue leader and anyone in power from Rome that crosses their path. In order to be able to fulfill this mission, they are going to have to be single-minded, tough, connected to one

another, and focused on Jesus and their mission to carry on his work. They will face opposition and struggle on a daily basis. The cozy days of breaking bread with Jesus and hanging on his every word will be gone. In response to the good news of the gospel that they preach they will be rewarded by persecution. No one in power wants to hear anything about another kind of kingdom...particularly a kingdom where justice rules, where the poor are cared for, where the sick are healed, where individual people are valued, and where the rich are brought down from high places. That's a recipe for having your head handed to you on a platter.

This kind of struggle has been part of Christian life through the ages. We know there have been countless Christian heroes who went to their deaths rather than betray Jesus and the message. They believed that strongly in Jesus and the mission. If you have any doubt, spend a little time reading some history of Christianity. It's gruesome. And yet, Christianity itself is still with us. The Church has persevered. Even in times of fear we must remember that the Gospel is still true and the Gospel is still with us. What Jesus is telling his disciples is that nothing can be more important to them than delivering Jesus's message to as many people as they can and for as long as they can. The individual's personal well-being and perhaps the well-being of the entire family must be of less concern than the overarching importance of proclaiming God's word. And remember this: All of us are charged with proclaiming God's word. We are not responsible for how someone receives it or what they do or don't do with that information. That's between them and God. But remember, too, that it is very much our responsibility to share the God news because every individual, indeed every family, and all of society will thrive when the gospel's good news is heard and embraced. But there is great resistance to that idea.

While the kingdom is the ideal for all of us, kingdom work is more controversial and subversive than conventional kindness. And it's dangerous. It challenges the status quo. It refigures the source and distribution of power. It turns things upside down. It requires that people of faith take risks that are unnerving and frightening. I don't know about you, but I'm a bit of a coward when it comes to my physical well-being, my social standing and my relationships. I don't want to risk any of them being disrupted. All of those things make my life comfortable...even happy!! Why should I risk losing them by telling people the good news about Jesus and inviting them to look at life in a different way? Lots of people don't *want* to look at things in a different way!! They are perfectly happy with their lives and they aren't too concerned about the basic structure of society. It's never occurred to them that they benefit from that structure and that others of God's children are oppressed by it. But I do not want to cause trouble by pointing that out. And I have a yellow streak a mile wide. I do not want to upset anyone. I do not want anyone to be mad at me. So why not just live a good life, follow Jesus in my heart and mind my own business? Right? It's much safer and more peaceful. And I don't have to run risk of having people I truly care about turn their backs on me. Why even worry about all this? It doesn't

concern me or my life. I can take care of the flock entrusted to me, celebrate Holy Eucharist, teach Bible study, and preach a decent sermon. Why should I get mixed up in social issues?

But here's the thing: I should be concerned about what's happening to other people because they are God's children as well and because ignoring all of this is not what Jesus asked me to do. Pretending that I don't see it has nothing to do with keeping my baptismal vows to God. If I'm going to be a disciple....which means learner, by the way...I have to be willing to take some risks. I have to be willing to stick my neck out and run the risk of having my head handed to me. I'm not an apostle...a messenger...delivering a particular message. I am a learner...a disciple...and I am to share what I've learned and what I've experienced with God and Christ when I talk with other people. I am to bear witness to my own experiences with Jesus... and with God...and with the Holy Spirit. I can, for example, testify to people that God never abandons us. I've experienced that. But some people don't want to hear that and, moreover, they don't want their lives to be disrupted in any way and they don't want God too get too close. They might have to change something. And they don't want to take a step out into the unknown for the sake of Jesus because life is pretty good just the way it is. My talking about it just arouses their anger. They would just as soon follow Jesus without ever doing anything or thinking anything differently. Tempers can flare and my own discomfort level goes up. I am hurt and feel alienated and that's not what I wanted. And I'm looking at Jesus saying to him, "Jesus, you don't know what you're asking. You don't know what's at stake here." And Jesus just looks at me and says, "I was nailed on a cross for this message. Of course I know what's at stake here!"

In the face of conflict that disciples and Christian missionaries can expect, in the face even of personal and family turmoil, theologian and renowned preacher Tom Long says this: "Four things will be seen. First, the Holy Spirit will surely be present and will never abandon us. Second we will come to recognize that our suffering is not wasted, but is a testimony to faith. Third, even in the midst of our hardships, we will know that nothing can eradicate the gospel or destroy God's loving and watchful care over the faithful. And finally, while family disruption will surely take place, Jesus is not against the family. But there will be times when allegiance to Jesus causes a crisis of loyalty and forces a decision because the gospel shakes up values, rearranges priorities, and reorients goals.¹" The shake-up doesn't always go well with the family.

Believers know that their fate is in the hands of a loving God and Jesus reminds us that a sparrow will not fall to the ground apart from the Father and that God knows how many hairs are in your head. God knows all about you...and loves you anyway!! "Do not be afraid;" Jesus tells us all, "You are of more value than many sparrows."

All of us must come to terms with our own reluctance to speak the gospel, to preach the gospel, to spread the good news for fear of causing controversy and perhaps disrupting relationships. In your prayers, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in the way to go: to be prudent in some situations and to be outspoken in others and to know which is which. God will guide your steps and will prevail against every hurt and every challenge that comes your way.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

¹Long, Thomas G., Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). pp. 120-122.