

Luke 14:25-33

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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25 Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, 26 "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. 27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. 33 So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

“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.”

Heartwarming words from Jesus on kick-off Sunday.

It’s a strange thing—isn’t it?—that the same person who commands us to love our neighbors and even our enemies, tells us to hate our own family members. Except, not surprisingly, that isn’t quite what he meant. The Greek word that’s translated, here, as “hate,” is more like “turn away from,” or “reject.” Still not the stuff of Hallmark cards, but a little less harsh.

To understand where Jesus was coming from, it’s important to consider what *family* meant to the people he was addressing. In their culture, family had a stranglehold on everything about a person’s life. It determined their social standing and how they earned a living. It determined whom they married and what god they worshiped. Legally speaking, some members of the family were actually possessions of other members. Husbands owned their wives. Fathers owned their children. Not by accident, then, does this passage, which begins with hating family members, end by saying “so *therefore*, none of you can become my disciple if you don’t give up all your *possessions*.”

At several different points in the Gospels, we see Jesus distancing himself from the claims of his own family of origin, and embracing a larger family that was based, not on blood, but on faithfulness to God—as in Matthew, when he says, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”
[Matthew 12:50]

I’m guessing that rejection of the notion that our families own us is why this reading is paired with the letter to Philemon, a slave owner. In it, Paul asks him to free Onesimus, who was enslaved by Philemon, because Onesimus is now a Christian and, therefore, a brother. The implied message is that family members should not be our possessions.

I remember when our children were small, and I would wake up in the middle of the night when everyone else was asleep, and listen to the sounds of breathing coming from all the bedrooms. It was like being in a giant lung, all of us breathing together.

More often, though, parenting has been an experience of gradually-increasing separation. The separations of birth and weaning, daycare and preschool, kindergarten and sleepovers and high school and driver’s licenses. From the beginning, their lives were becoming more and more their own, with stories and experiences of which I was not a part—and some of which I’m probably better-off not knowing!

In the passage right before this in Luke, Jesus tells the parable of a great dinner to which the host invites all sorts of guests, but one after another, the guests make excuses, all of them tied to the responsibilities of property or family. Apparently, the guests reflect the many people who professed admiration for Jesus, but who weren’t willing to let go of the things that kept them from following.

So Jesus cautions his listeners about the foolishness of beginning an enterprise without fully anticipating the costs. Good advice, but honestly, if we’re talking about parenting, no one can fully anticipate the cost of raising children. There are statistics about the financial costs—the current estimate for raising a middle class, American child from birth to age eighteen is something like \$234,000, though I always wonder what they’re including in that—but the other costs are way harder to put a price on. Like the lost sleep, the lost confidence—I was much more of an expert on parenting before I had actual children--and the lost pride. There were so many things that no child of *mine* would ever do, so many things that *I* would never do when *I* was a parent—and I’m pretty sure that they, and I, ended up doing most of them.

I have a theory that one reason God gives us children is to keep us humble, and show us how little control we actually have. Acknowledging that may feel like a loss, but it can also be a source of great reassurance, and even freedom.

Think of the pressures on parents to do everything right—the right feeding and sleeping practices, the right method of potty-training, the right preschool and school system, the right traveling team and test-prep tutor, because if we do any of this wrong, their futures will be ruined. Parents, then, take this pressure and turn it on their children, in the belief that everything their child does is a judgment on their work as parents. That pressure can suck all the air out of our family relationships. When she was in high school, one of my daughter’s friends, who was normally an “A” student, took home a report card with a B+ on it. Her mother freaked out. “You’re going to end up going to a state school and becoming a kindergarten teacher!” she shrieked.

Oh, the shame of it!

But what if our children are not just a direct reflection of us? And what if there is someone else who is guiding their path? Are we willing to let go of our own expectations, and allow them to follow that other path—especially if their path is more faithful to Jesus’ calling than our own?

When we lived in Kansas City, we had a colleague, Sam Mann, who had grown up in Alabama. His parents were both deeply religious and deeply racist, and that had seemed normal to him. Then he went away to college at the height of the Civil Rights movement. He began to see the discrepancy between the teachings of Jesus, and the way his own church had seen people of color. He became the pastor of a predominantly African-American church in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Kansas City, and spent his whole ministry working for racial and economic justice.

So here’s the thing—he came to hate his parents’ attitude and reject their teaching—but not because he rejected their faith. It was they who had had him baptized. They who had taken him to Sunday School and church. They who had introduced him to Jesus. But he had a much better understanding than they did of what he needed to give up, in order to be Jesus’ follower.

The fact that we can’t control everything our children think and feel and experience can feel like a loss at times. I’ve always been convinced that my own children’s lives would go much more smoothly if they would just do everything I tell them—but we’ll never know! And, of course, there are plenty of other reasons that kids try to break free from their parents that don’t have anything to do with following Jesus—let’s just acknowledge that!

But, when we have our children baptized, and when we bring them to worship and to Sunday School, they are watching us to see whether we actually mean the words that we say. I mean both “we” as parents, and “we” as the church that made promises at their baptism to nurture them in the faith. They’re watching to see whether we actually live the faith we profess. And when our words and our actions don’t add up, they’re likely to either decide that the church is irrelevant and leave, altogether; or fight to make the actions of the church match our words. In times of social change, it is often the young people who push for greater justice, greater inclusion, more Jesus-like behavior on the part of the church; and to do so, they often have to fight the resistance of the very folks who taught them to be disciples, in the first place.

But we do have another option. Instead of fighting them, we could watch, with curiosity and excitement, to see where Jesus leads them. And as we watch our children’s faith grow, we can recommit to our own faith, listening with curiosity and excitement, to find where Jesus is leading *us*.

So, as Sunday School starts back, and as our Middle-Schoolers begin the Confirmation process in preparation for professing their faith, what if we adults committed to a re-Confirmation process? What if we dove into Sunday School and Bible Study and small groups and Focus @ First with intentionality, expecting that our faith will be deepened and challenged? What if we sought out new ways to serve Christ both within the church and through other avenues? What if we let go of whatever it is that’s holding *us* back, and re-committed to our calling to be disciples in every area of our lives?

Our children’s lives may not be ours to control, but then, neither are ours. Their lives, and ours, belong to God. We are all simply disciples trying to do our best to follow Jesus. Once we acknowledge that, then, instead of watching our children walk off into the distance, we may find ourselves going in the same direction, just friends and companions, along the way that Christ sets out for all of us.