

## Letting Go

Craig Atwood, 9/7/2025

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were accompanying Jesus, and turning to them he said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, and wife and children, and brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn’t sit down first and compute the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish the tower,<sup>1</sup> all who see it will begin to make fun of <sup>[m]</sup>him. They will say, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish!’

Or what king, going out to confront another king in battle, will not sit down first and determine whether he is able with 10,000 to oppose the one coming against him with 20,000? If he cannot succeed, he will send a representative while the other is still a long way off and ask for terms of peace.

In the same way therefore not one of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his own possessions.

## INTRODUCTION

As you probably know, Ginny and I almost always preach from the assigned texts for each Sunday from what is called the Common Lectionary. The benefits of this is that these same texts are being used in most denominations and it ensures that we do not just pick and choose our favorite texts. But, as Ginny has said before, sometimes the lectionary plays tricks on you by giving a text that you would *never* pick for a certain day. I certainly would not have chosen today’s gospel for the Sunday that we are honoring people who have lived for nine decades and more, but after wrestling with our gospel text for several days, I think it illuminates several very important things about our journey with Christ through the years.

HATE?

Let's jump right into the most difficult verse in this passage. Jesus says that no one can be his disciple without hating their own family members. It is truly shocking to hear Jesus saying that his disciples should hate their mothers and fathers, and I spent a couple of hours researching the Greek word *Misei* to see if it could mean something other than "hate." Yes. It can also mean detest, despise, loathe, or disregard. So, there is no help for a preacher there. I also learned that we still use this Greek word in English words like misanthrope and misogynist, which are people who hate all people and those who just hate women. Could Jesus, who taught us that love of neighbors and love of God are the greatest commandments, have really said we must hate our families?

## SHAKING THE FOUNDATIONS

Jesus often said and did shocking things, like breaking the sabbath and eating with infamous sinners, to shake us out of our normal way of thinking. Many of his sayings seem intended to shock us out of our assumptions and make us look at things in a new way, much the way modern artists take what is familiar and make it unfamiliar.

I think this statement in Luke is a lot like the surrealist artist Rene Magritte's famous painting of a tobacco pipe with words above it that say in French "this is not a pipe." When you first see the painting, you want to argue with the artist and say "of course that is a pipe. It even has smoke curling out of it." But then you realize that the artist is correct. That is not a pipe; is a representation of a pipe. It is not real, it is illusion. And then comes a new awareness that all art is merely a representation of the world. It is an illusion that helps us see reality more clearly. Sometimes the Bible gives us a new way of perceiving.

## LET GO

When Jesus told you to hate your father and mother, he wasn't giving license to teen-agers to scream "I hate you" to their parents and then slam their bedroom door and put on depressing emo music. Such immature outbursts of frustration and anger are part of the painful process of puberty, but I think Jesus is talking about something different.

It looks like Jesus used the word "hate" to emphasize the contrast between our devotion to him and attachment to everything else on earth. He chose the very things that most demand our loyalty and allegiance, our families and our own lives, to impress upon us what it means to become his disciples. Being a disciple is more than just reciting a creed or singing a hymn or even getting ordained; it is giving Christ your

whole life. To be a disciple of Christ is a life-long process of learning to let go of things; to learn non-attachment to the things of this world. To be disciple of Christ is to let go our pride, our selfishness, our arrogance, our quest for status, even our quest for security.

## FAMILIES ARE GOOD, BUT NOT ALL RELATIVES ARE FAMILY

I know that most people here at Home Church have good families, and some of you even know who your fourth cousins, once removed are. Most of you know what it is like to be loved by your parents, and once you got past adolescent angst, you wanted to be like your parents. And I'm sure that most of us here today are Christian because a family member made the effort to bring us to church, have us baptized, read us bible stories, watched proudly as we sang in the children's choir, and did a thousand and one other things to teach us to be good, kind, and loving Christians. But not everyone has that blessing. I know many young people who were rejected by their families because of their identity or vocation or political views. I know people who celebrate Friendsgiving in November because they feel unwelcome at their family's Thanksgiving dinner.

A Moravian pastor named T.C. Moore published a book titled "Forged: Following Jesus into a New Kind of Family." He wrote "Growing up without a father and not knowing how to talk about my experiences of abuse and neglect by my mother made me feel like an outcast, like I didn't belong in my own family." (p. 4) He tells about trying to belong by joining a violent teen-age gang, a choice led him down a dark path of despair. Finally, someone cared enough to take him to church, and the Holy Spirit broke through his defenses. God shook him up.

Overwhelmed with a feeling of God's love, T.C. was baptized and joined a community of faith. "Everything changed," he wrote. "My world was turned upside down. Suddenly the center of my identity had shifted because of the new family to which I now belonged. Men and women in the congregation embraced me with the love of Jesus. ... Their smiles became the smiles of God." (p. 5) Before T.C. could find his new family, he had to let go of the illusions and pain of the past. He had to let go of the darkness and let God bring the light. After he became a Christian, T.C. studied the gospels and learned that the church is a family of misfits and outcasts who don't have it all together but do have each other. (p. 115-116) That is the message of

our gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus was not trying to destroy families, he was teaching us that not even our families are of ultimate value.

## LETTING GO OF EGO

Our Moravian ancestors understood this and put it into practice. In his spiritual classic, *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart*, John Amos Comenius told the story of a pilgrim who journeyed through world and discovered that nothing in this life can make you truly happy or truly secure. He got married and had children, and then they were taken from him in death. Everything he tried turned out to be meaningless. In despair the pilgrim is contemplating suicide because he feels so alienated and frightened. But then he hears the voice of Christ calling to him to let go of everything and look deep inside his heart. And then Christ tells him that he needs to go, to let go of this work, to let go of his need for status, to let go of his own ego. The pilgrim needs to embrace the one thing necessary: Christ. In letting go of his ego and finding Christ, the Pilgrim finds his true self. And then he went back into the world with hope and love.

The Moravian choir system, which we still use in God's Acre, was a way of teaching people that we are not bound by biology nor defined by family. Here in Salem, children learned that they are valuable because they are children of God, regardless of their pedigree. Single women and single men learned that they are free to follow God without getting married or doing the same vocation as their parents. Married men and married women were taught to view their marriage as a symbol of God's sacrificial love, not a way to improve their status or wealth. By loving God, they could truly love each other through the years. And widows and widowers were treated with respect and loving kindness because their identity did not depend on having a spouse. And everyone in the church learned that nothing in life can or should separate us from the love of Christ. This Moravian idea that family is not our ultimate concern was controversial then and is controversial today.

## LETTING GO OF PATRIARCHY

Jesus shook people up when he said that his disciples need to let go of possessions and family. Family was the foundation of the social order in ancient times for both Jews and Gentiles. Except for a few wild-eyed Cynics, everyone in the ancient world believed the only thing that made humans civilized was patriarchy. Honor your father and mother is the fifth commandment, as you know. Some of the harshest penalties in

the laws of Moses in the Old Testament were given to children who disobeyed and insulted their parents. But Jesus wanted his disciples to know that greatest love of all, is love for Christ. All else is secondary. To be a disciple of Christ is to let go things that we think are more important than God. Throughout history, there have been saints who proved this by letting go of family, possessions, and even their lives.

In the year 203 AD in the ancient city of Carthage in Africa, there was woman of noble birth who became a Christian against the wishes of her father. Her name was Perpetua. Her father was ashamed of her because she renounced the family's deities and defied the law by joining the church. It just so happened that the governor of Carthage decided to honor the emperor's birthday by arresting suspected Christians. He tried to force them to renounce Christ and sacrifice to the emperor as their god. Even though she was a noble, Perpetua was arrested. She was a young mother, and for several weeks she was imprisoned without her baby. But she was in prison with her brothers and sisters in Christ and God blessed her prayers.

The day came when Perpetua was brought before the governor and ordered to renounce Christ. That young mother stood in front of the most powerful man she would ever see on earth and calmly told him "no." Her father came and demanded that she obey him and the emperor. Again, she said "no." The guards beat her father because he could not control his daughter, and she wept for his shame, but she told him that she could not stop being a Christian any more than she could stop being a mother. It was her identity. Her "no" shook the empire.

Her father begged her to think of her baby, and she replied that she thought of him every day, but if she renounced her faith how could she teach her child right from wrong? She knew the church would raise her child when she was gone, and that the two to them would be together in eternity. And then the governor had her thrown to the beasts in the coliseum for the entertainment of the crowd. The cheering and jeering soon stopped as they saw Perpetua's courage and dignity in the face of death. We are told that many in the crowd and even one of her jailers chose to follow her path. They embraced Christ in faith.

## CONCLUSION

Perpetua did not despise her father and mother; she loved them and pitied them. But once she gave her life to Christ, she would not renounce her faith. And the mightiest empire in the ancient world trembled with fear because a young mother said no its

demands. St Perpetua let go of everything, even her life, knowing that she belonged to Christ. By letting go, we learn that Christ is with us. Now and always.