

Proper 18 C 2022 RCL
Philemon; Psalm 139; Luke 14:25-33
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In today's gospel, Jesus says some things that hit pretty hard. While he is talking about difficult and challenging matters of discipleship, we need to dig deeper into his context to understand what he might mean and how we should apply it in our own lives

Jesus says that we should hate father and mother and family and even life itself if we want to be his disciple. Then he says we should carry the cross and follow him. He says we cannot be his disciples unless we give up all our possessions.

The most important thing we need to understand is what the word "hate" meant in Jesus' context. For us, hate is a very emotional word, filled with passion and feeling. We often use it as the opposite of love, but with the same intensity. If we try to make the people we love happy, we want to make the people we hate miserable. When talk about hating something, usually we have a visceral reaction that involves disgust and loathing, if not vomiting or burning it all to the ground.

In Jesus context, hate meant something else. Hate meant not regarding something highly. Hate meant lowering something on the list of priorities. Hate did not have the same emotional impact, and hate did not necessarily mean wanting evil or destruction to fall upon someone's head. When Jesus is talking about hating your family, he does not mean getting a one-way ticket out of town after setting your homestead on fire. He means making the decision to value those relationships, including with our own life, less than our relationship as a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus puts this teaching so strongly that he talks about hating your family for two reasons. The first was that the honor/shame culture in that part of the world in Jesus' day gave a prominence to accepting your family's decisions that bordered on idolatry. Think about the extreme cases today in some cultures around honor killings, where family members have punished or even killed their kin who they believe brought shame to them. Or think about how the law would have let Joseph put Mary to death for becoming pregnant, since she had shamed him. A similar honor/shame system exists in most of the world that hasn't been touched by Christianity. Think about Japanese culture where businessmen have committed suicide for professional mistakes or simply for reaping the consequences of economic downturns, rather than bring shame on themselves or their families. The idea of "saving face" comes out of this honor/shame system.

Jesus consistently taught against an honor/shame culture in favor of an individual guilt with forgiveness understanding. We operate under that model in the West, and especially in America. If someone breaks the law, they go to jail but not their families. If someone overdraws their credit card, the family is only responsible if they were co-signers. When someone dies, any debts they can't pay go away. They aren't passed on to children. In America, all of us who aren't descended from indigenous people groups have either left home and family to come here or have

already been thrown out of wherever we were, so our sense of honor and shame is almost non-existent compared to Jesus' day.

In the first century culture of Palestine, what Jesus says about hating your family is not an emotional appeal to some anti-parent sentiment. He is just stating the reality that people have to be prepared for if they set out to follow him. At some point, almost every one of his disciples is going to get a letter from home that says, "We don't like what we hear about this teacher. People in the neighborhood are talking. Come home now." Or, "Time to harvest the crops, enough theologizing with traveling rabbis. Come home now." Or, "A nice Jewish girl doesn't traipse all over the countryside like this. We have a good marriage arranged for you, and Aunt Mariam will meet you Wednesday to bring you home." Now if I said those things to my children, they would probably text me back a bunch of emojis that I would have to google the meaning of, say they love me, and continue doing whatever they were doing. But in Jesus day, if anyone's parents sent the message, they would either have to go right home, or they would be deciding to cut themselves off from their family. When Jesus was actually convicted of being a political traitor and executed, anyone who still had any ties with family who were not also Jesus' disciples would be under enormous family pressure, since their decision to stay with Jesus' followers could be dangerous to everyone in the family. There was no way that people who did not value their family less than their relationship with Jesus could be Jesus' followers. Jesus words are a simple, practical, statement of fact.

Jesus is saying that there will be demands of following him that your family might not like, so be ready. He is not saying, however, not to love our family or help them when we can. We know in another place he addresses people that are using their religious obligations as an excuse not to give money or care to parents that need it. Jesus says that's a big no-no. Religious rules do not give you the right to ignore your family's needs when you can meet them, and your family's opinions and community status take the back seat to the our call to follow Jesus. Even as Jesus talks about hate, the gospel is still about love – love of God and love of neighbor.

Today, most of us aren't going to be disinvited from our family's Christmas dinner because we came to church. But there are still lots of pressure, both from families and from legalistic religious laws that families buy into, that keep us from living into a liberating, loving relationship with God. We know a lot of people end up in the Episcopal Church because of whom they have decided to love and marry, sometimes breaking ties with family and other churches to do so. Often God's love and call leads us to decisions that others close to us don't understand, and they may try to stop us. While we love our families in the modern sense, we may also have to hate them in the first century Palestinian sense, and follow our hearts into the love, freedom, joy, and peace that God is always calling us into.

At the end of today's passage Jesus says that we need to give up all our possessions to follow him. He knows he is going to the cross. His disciples will either be killed as well, or put in prison, or scattered as missionaries to the ends of the earth to escape persecution. Any of those scenarios is going to require giving up all their possessions. No one is going to follow Jesus to the cross if their primary concern is keeping the accounts in order, and you can't carry much when you are fleeing Jerusalem to escape political and religious authorities looking for Christians.

Throughout history, there have been saints who have given up all they had to the poor and taken on a life of Christian poverty, often over the strenuous objection of their families. Probably more people are called to such a life today than take it up. At the same time, all of us are called to hold our possessions lightly and treat them as resources to build up the Kingdom of God, and not as personal wealth which we are entitled to consume based on our own whims.

The reading from Philemon today offers an example of what is asked of someone with resources who is a follower of Jesus. Philemon is a wealthy Christian in Colossae who has a slave named Onesimus. A slave would have been a valuable resource at that time. I will say in passing that the ancient economic system of slavery was very different than American race-based chattel slavery, but that doesn't make it right. As something they could not change, slavery was taken for granted by most ancient people, including apparently some wealthy Christians.

Onesimus has run away from his master Philemon, and somehow found his way to Paul, who is currently in prison. Unlike today's jails, a prisoner in those days might be chained to something in their house, with a soldier guarding them. The prisoner's friends could often provide what they needed, but someone had to take care of all their basic needs – the soldier was not emptying the prisoner's chamber pot, for example. We don't know why Onesimus ran away or why he ended up with Paul, but he helps Paul while Paul is a prisoner. Yet, Paul cannot knowingly have a runaway slave in the house with him indefinitely, without getting into trouble with the law. Paul wants the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon settled in a Christian way.

Paul has very good things to say about Onesimus's master, Philemon. He seems to be a generous person who uses his wealth to benefit others in ways that don't make them feel inferior or indebted. Then Paul describes how Onesimus has been helping him, and that he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, as would be proper. But, Paul says, please send him back to me. I need his help, and since you can't be here to help me, this would be the best thing you could do. Paul also makes a play on words because Onesimus's name means "useful" or "profitable", and Paul says now Onesimus will be useful to you. He will no longer be a slave to you, but a beloved brother that you will have for all eternity!

Paul recognizes that this might be a big ask, so he adds two other things. He not-so-subtly reminds Philemon that Paul has brought him to Christ and so in some way, Philemon already owes him everything. Then Paul also recognizes that Onesimus may have stolen property or done other damage to Philemon as he left, and Paul offers to repay Philemon for that debt.

Now we know Philemon did as Paul asked because we have this private letter. If Philemon didn't want to listen he would definitely have destroyed it before we had a chance to read it. We also have a letter from Ignatius of Antioch about fifty years later who mentions an Onesimus who is bishop of Ephesus. We can't prove that these two Onesimuses (Onesimi?) are the same person. But a young man in Paul's day could be a seventy year old bishop in Ignatius's time. And such a prominent leader in a prominent early Christian community would certainly have kept, and shared, this letter that would have meant so much to him. All because a wealthy man could see a slave not as his expensive property but as a potential brother in Christ. He had already given up

his possessions for the gospel in his own spirit, even as he remained responsible to use them rightly in the times and places that they would make a difference.

Gratefully, we are more likely to be in a situation like Philemon than like that of early disciples facing persecution. We have resources, and most of us have Christian family and friends that understand and respect our desire to follow Jesus. Yet, like Philemon, we still have to make difficult decisions from time to time, and we have to place our relationship with Jesus above the opinions and pressures of family, friends, clubs, political affiliations, social media trends, rigid religious understandings, or anything else that might distract us from our walk of discipleship. Philemon provides very useful directions to us in this walk: How do we use what we have and who we are to love and serve those Jesus calls us to love, and what will gain us siblings in Christ for all eternity?