

A Crisis of Loyalty
Matthew 10:34-42, Romans 6:1-6
First Presbyterian Church
June 25, 2017

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE READING

It happened a couple of weeks too soon... I mean that if ever there was a perfect illustration of how we should come to the sacrament of baptism, it may be little Maddox Bost two Sundays ago: the little guy was crying and squirming and basically doing everything he could to express his discomfort at the moment. Now I'm not saying that Maddox actually knew what was going on – he was just being a typical kid – but once you hear this passage from Romans you might wonder. Because here Paul will say that baptism means dying... and who wants that? Even if there's a promise of resurrection at the other end, who among us welcomes being baptized into death? Though on the one hand, Maddox was simply being a little boy... on the other hand, maybe he was on to something.

Romans 6:1-6

⁶What then are we to say?

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?

²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?

³Do you not know that all of us

who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death,

so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead

by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him

so that the body of sin might be destroyed,

and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 10:34-42

³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother,

and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

³⁶and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

³⁷Whoever 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; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

⁴⁰“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;

⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple— truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Sermon

Is it heresy for your preacher to say that there are some passages of Scripture I truly don't like? Should I be banned from the pulpit for wishing Matthew had never written this one down? Because the truth is I don't much like this passage... I don't like its harsh language... and I don't like what Jesus seems to be saying. Families are already so fractured... under so much pressure... the last thing we need is Jesus setting a son against his father... a daughter against her mother... husband and wife against one another. You may have heard how politics is doing this to families... studies show that parents are now more accepting of their child marrying someone of another race or religion than the OTHER political party. So the last thing we need is a Lord who strides into our family rooms with a sword in his hand to chop us apart.

It's interesting how some things never seem to change. Almost 3,000 years ago, the Old Testament prophet Micah bemoaned the family strife in his day as a sign of slackening faith: He says: “For the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.”¹ Some things never change, and yet, Jesus takes these words of Micah and puts a surprising twist on them – he tells his disciples that the kind of family division Micah lamented so many years before... is now a consequence of following him... it is now a real possibility for them. In other words, what WAS a sign of slackening faith is NOW the cost of discipleship. ³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword... to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and one's foes will be members of one's own household.”

¹ Micah 7:6

So what does this mean for us? Does it mean that Jesus is anti-family... is the Lord basically a home-wrecker? Well, the honest answer is probably “yes” and “no”. No... Jesus is not a home-wrecker... he’s not anti-family... and in fact, there are times when I’d say he’s very “pro-family.” Such as later in Matthew when he teaches that it is God who joins together husband and wife... and when he quotes with favor the commandment to “honor your father and mother.”²

But, yes, Jesus coming into our world creates a crisis for us... answering his call to lose our life for his sake forces a decision... and that decision has consequences not only for us, but for all our relationships.³

You know, I think sometimes we wrongly imagine Jesus as being sort of “relationship-neutral”—especially when he says stuff like we hear today. After all, we say, “He’s Jesus... he’s the Christ... the Son of the Living God... he can’t really care that much about these earthly relationships... he’s just on a different plane from us. And there is truth to that. Which is why it’s so important for us to remember those times the Gospel writers reveal other parts of who he is – to remember him weeping at Lazarus’ grave... to remember how from the cross he tenderly places his mother into the care of his beloved disciple. Because it’s a huge mistake my friends, to think Jesus wasn’t impacted by his close relationships. He knew about families... and how powerful families are in our lives, whether they’re working well or not. He knew how easy it is for us to get consumed by them... whether we’re a close-knit bunch or completely estranged from each other. He knew how we pour ourselves into our families so that we forget who we are apart from them. And I also think he knew that it is only when we discover who we are apart from them that we can be part of them in a healthy way.”⁴

Here’s what I mean – I am a brother... a husband... a father... I’m now A GRANDFATHER... I’m an uncle... a nephew... a cousin. Each of these roles... each of these identities has shaped me, but none of them completely contains me. There is only one thing that completely contains me: I am a child of God.

And it’s the same for each of you. Each one of you has your own list of roles... but like me you are God’s child first. And the main difference is that being God’s child is not a role you play... it is who you most truly are. And when you know that... when you really know that... chances are that you will not be swallowed up by any of the roles you play in your life. Friends, we don’t have to hate our families in order to remember who we are apart from them.

Yet the truth is that sometimes following Jesus does create division with the ones are closest to. And that, in fact, is exactly what was happening to a lot of folks in Matthew’s church – the folks he was writing his Gospel for - they were already estranged from their families because they followed Jesus.

² Matthew 19:3-6 and 19:19

³ Thomas G. Long in *Matthew* (Westminster Bible Companion Series – WJKP – 1997), 122.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor in a sermon entitled “Learning to Hate Your Parents” published in *God in Pain, Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, p. 27-32.

You see, it was the custom at the time that the entire household would adopt the faith of whoever was the head. Everyone in the house was compelled to believe and follow whatever that one person believed and followed - spouses, children, servants, everyone. So choosing to be a Christian had real consequences for a lot of people... and not all of those people appreciated that. For example, following Jesus might mean selling everything you own and giving the money to the poor. Can you imagine what would happen in YOUR family if whoever was the designated head decided to adopt a simple lifestyle based on need rather than having whatever I want whenever I want it? Following Jesus might mean associating with a whole new class of people. Can you imagine your son or daughter... the one you've just put through college and were expecting to go on to medical school, deciding to scrap that plan to move to Haiti to do mission work? And in Matthew's day, following Jesus certainly would have meant bringing the whole household under suspicion with the Roman government. Can you imagine living under an oppressive government... where being a Christian is a dangerous thing... and someone in your family risking your property and even your lives in order to hold Bible studies and worship services in your home?

Well, if you can imagine these things you'll understand there were lots of people sitting in Matthew's congregation who had already been booted out of their families because of Jesus. Relationships were already broken... insults were already being hurled... communication had already been cut off. So when Matthew tells them what Jesus said about coming not to bring peace but a sword... about coming to turn man against father and daughter against mother... they weren't frightened by his words as we tend to be... instead, they were comforted by them. Because it was as though the Lord himself knew what would happen to them... as if Jesus understood the price they would pay... and was trying to reassure them ahead of time... to encourage them to keep the faith because he was with them... and in the end, all would be well.

Obviously we live in a different world than they did. There are different consequences in our day for following Jesus. Sadly, much of that has to do with where we are born. But one thing has not changed... and that is our deep, deep desire for kinship. Some of us find that kinship in our marriage and family... some of us find it in our friends and church... some of us find it online with people we never meet in person. But wherever we find it, Jesus' claim on us is the same: we are to love him above all other loves. And, God forbid, if that ever means losing the ones we love for the sake of Christ, we are not to fear... because buried in the fine print of this hard passage is a promise: that whatever we lose for his sake we shall find again... that whatever must die in us because of him will be returned to us more alive than ever before.

Prayer

God we thank you this morning for all of the bonds of kinship we enjoy in this life – the relationships with family and friends and sisters and brothers in Christ that we depend on and that give us such joy in this life. We thank you for all of the roles we are privileged to play in life and work and community. Yet, we ask you to help us always remember that it is your love for

us... your acceptance of us... your purpose for us that defines us ... that contains us. We are above all else your beloved children.

We pray for those who in the past have suffered real consequences because they chose to love and serve you above all else... and we pray for those who are suffering this very day for your sake. And in those moments when we are faced with a crisis of loyalty... when we are called to decide who we will serve, enable each of us, O God, by the power of your Spirit at work in us, to choose you... follow you... to walk with you holding on to your promise to be with us always. These things we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ... and as one body we pray together as he taught... Our Father...

Amen.