

They say time flies when you're having fun, right? This weekend, Friday to be exact, our youngest child (who you've met and who now likes to be called Jay) turned 25, and Jeff and I had the chance to go down to Tennessee to celebrate this milestone birthday. It only seems like yesterday that Jay was born; it was a warm summer day much like today and I was so glad to be giving birth! Over the years we have truly enjoyed being parents, being a family together, and the hardest part of moving up here is being farther from our kids. So we take every opportunity that we can to see them. This trip was quick, down and back in a little more than 24 hours, but it was worth it to be together. Nick was also up and while we didn't get to spend a large amount of time together it was special just to see each other and hug and laugh together a little bit. You all know how it feels to be with family, even if they're chosen family rather than blood kin—it's special and warm and lovely (most of the time anyway.)

Jesus has some interesting things to say about family relationships in our scripture for today. This is one of those passages that may be very difficult for us to deal with, especially given the "family first" emphasis that Christians prefer. The ideal in the US, especially among Christians, is that a family is a mom and a dad and kids, who live together in some type of single family home or apartment. And while there's nothing wrong with that, I think we all know that in reality families come in all shapes and sizes. And I think we also know that in our not-so-distant past families tended to include other relatives like grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins all living together under one roof. When you talk to people about what's important to them in life, family ties are almost always at the top of the list. So when we hear Jesus saying what he says in our passage for today, it blows our minds.

In this passage we hear Jesus saying that if we love our families more than him we aren't worthy of him. Now what do you think this might mean? Does Jesus literally mean we need to love him more than the people in our lives who mean the most to us? Well, in a very real sense, yes he does mean that. I think Jesus wants to emphasize here that following him isn't something easy to do. Following Jesus, really following him, means giving up your old life, your old values, your old ways of being in the world and living your life the way the world tells you to. It's similar to what we hear Jesus saying about loving our neighbors as we love ourselves: in order to do that we must put the needs of someone else ahead of what we want and need. In the same way, in order to follow the way of Jesus Christ we must put the way of Christ first in our lives. Our belief in Christ and our service to Christ must come first in our lives, and everything else after. If we truly put Christ first and sincerely try to follow his way, then I think our family relationships will grow and deepen—especially if we're able to share our faith with our own families in a meaningful way.

But, does putting Christ first mean that we should neglect our families? I don't think so. I think Jesus is pointing out that things we do in following him might conflict with what other people want us to do or how they want us to act. Following Jesus is a pretty radical act if we follow as we're called to do—to go out among the wolves to tend the sheep—and others might think we're putting ourselves at risk or giving a break to people who don't deserve it. We might have to choose between doing what our families want us to do and what Jesus calls us to do—and while that choice might be hard it's pretty clear that to Jesus the correct choice is following his way.

To unpack that a little bit, let's put the passage in perspective. First of all, this is the second half of the passage that began last week, in which Jesus gives power to the disciples and sends them out into the towns and villages where he is planning to go. But other than the power to heal and loose demons he sent them out with only the clothes on their backs—no money, no extra clothes or food, nothing—and he tells them straight up that they are going into potential danger. He's saying, "you're following me *now*, but if your family objects, what then? If your friends make fun of you, if strangers make fun of you, what then?"

To go a little further, if we link this passage with Matthew verse 1 chapter 10 of the passage from last week we begin to see what's going on. The power of Jesus is dangerous and his actions in preaching and teaching and healing, especially speaking out against the Roman government and the Pharisees—are dangerous because they disrupt and disturb the powerful; because what does power want more than anything? To stay in power, to continue *to be the power* and have the control (and usually the wealth and privilege that goes with it.) Jesus' compassion for the poor and oppressed—which follows God's intentions laid out in the Jewish scriptures—is dangerous because it threatens to bring the oppressed together, to heal them and make them strong enough to escape the system that has been keeping them harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (as it said in last week's verses). Would your family want you to go out and say things and do things that might bring the authorities down on you—and perhaps even them?

Something else to think about is that this passage, in fact the whole gospel of Matthew, like the other gospels, was written late in the first century, well after Jesus' death. The people who would read this probably knew already what had happened to Jesus and what dangers his followers had faced and still faced at that time—knew indeed that just being mere *disciples* didn't make them any less hated than Jesus himself, didn't put them in any less danger than Jesus himself. As important as it was for the original disciples to hear *this is going to be dangerous* it was also important for the next generation to hear that same message. Not so much as a “be careful” message but a “this is vitally important and also threatening to the system, so be ready!” message. In an odd way, also an encouragement, because God would be with them in all situations.

This week a new healthcare bill was revealed by the Senate; and in response to the proposed large cuts to Medicaid found within it different groups around the country held protests—and many of the protestors were elderly and disabled persons. While I don't want to get into the politics of this here, it's important to note the response they received. In many cases they were forcibly removed from where they were protesting. These protesters made things inconvenient in some places, such as the hallway outside of Sen. McConnell's office in Lexington—some getting out of their wheelchairs and laying in the floor. But the images of them being carried out and arrested were hard to see. None of us would want this for our family members—and yet this is the kind of thing these disciples of Jesus were being warned that they might face. And still Jesus sends them out.

And Jesus sends us out as well. And we're not used to thinking of Christianity as being dangerous, are we? Except perhaps as something that was dangerous for early Christians. Our faith, though, is rarely challenged in any real way; oh, we may have to cede some of our power and privilege in the public square, but rarely are American Christians killed for being Christians. It happens occasionally, but not so much that we have to meet in secret, not so much that there aren't Christian churches on nearly every corner in America (or so it seems), not so much that we fear for our lives when we get up on Sunday morning to come to worship or when we go to Cornerstone to serve a meal.

Perhaps there is a question here that we need to ask ourselves: what if Christianity did mean jail, what if following Christ did mean our families would turn away from us, what if being Christian meant taking real risks with our very lives? Would we be ready to follow him? Would we be willing to turn up here on a Sunday morning to worship God, Christ and Spirit? What do *you* think? Amen.