

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now, in the Labor Day holiday weekend, starting Tuesday we are all back into our routines. School gets underway. Summer vacations are over, for the most part. But, before today, I continued with the regular swing of things: preparation of this morning's service, and taking another look at the lectionary and the readings assigned for this morning. Praying for insight. Being open to days of reflection. Wrestling, as always, with the thoughts and the themes of a message that God gradually reveals. Putting it all together in a way that, hopefully, seems natural..in light of the warm and special relationship that you and I have here.

I think about that. On Sunday mornings, I am always thinking about the details of the service and the dance of the liturgy, but also how good it feels to see dear, familiar faces again coming to the altar for communion and refreshment with God.

So, what do we hear Jesus saying today?

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**“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”**

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Hello?! What a nice welcome back to reality! It is like getting that two by four being swung by God and getting hit in the backside. Wake up, buster.

The fact remains that the gospel passage today comes across to us as totally contrary to our contemporary image and understanding of Jesus. How does it square with our foundational understanding of Jesus as the healer? The prince of peace? The babe in the manger...no crying he makes?

It is as if he comes and drops a science fiction movie line on us, “ I come in peace....NOT!”

Luke's gospel has been like this for weeks now, we ponder. Should he be the patron saint of grumps and curmudgeons? Why present Jesus in **this** way? What is Jesus doing...making **hate** a prerequisite?

Let us engage our imagination a little bit, and get into the feel of that time and place.

You are in the center market area of your village, or you are leaving the temple...going about your daily, living routine. The same today, as it was yesterday, and the month and year before that. Hum drum. Then, suddenly, a young village boy you know well runs into town...hot, dirty, out of breath, excited! “Jesus is coming,” he cries, “He is on the way and will be here later today with many

others!”

Well, you have heard of him! What excitement he brings! You drop your plans for the rest of the day and, when he and his followers enter the town....wow!

Imagine some comparable experience today. Now, I want to be clear that I am **not** putting modern-day celebrities in the same place as Jesus. Not at all. But I can imagine that the **fuss** that gets created in a crowd when they are in the presence of who?

**Frank Sinatra**....remembered so well by our older folks? Or **Elvis**? **Angelina Jolie**? I admit I do not know the current “big thing celebrities”, so please forgive me that! Oh, OK...how about **Taylor Swift**? **Rihanna**? See...fooled you. I do my research, but stay on the fringes!

Here we are in the village center, and Jesus..with a huge crowd...comes in. He had earlier been at a dinner in the home of a Pharisee, and his remarks were addressed to the small group gathered for that occasion. And here he is, on his way to Jerusalem. The crowd has infectious enthusiasm, because they think he is on his way to a crown. To them, Jesus is a “winner”..and everyone loves a winner!

However, in his lectures, **Gil Bailie** concludes from Luke’s gospel that Jesus was uneasy with large crowds. That he was a “wherever two or three are gathered together” type of guy. As Jesus is the only one who knows what was going to happen when he gets to Jerusalem...even though he has tried to tell them...he looks around at this large crowd and becomes uneasy by it. And he turns to them, what should he say? “I am glad you all came along?” “So nice to have you?”

No. **"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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."** Now, **that** will thin the crowd out, which is obviously what it is designed to do. Why?

Jesus thins down to those willing to make a firm commitment. He teaches them...and us...that discipleship carries a high price tag. Those who want to follow him need to count the cost before signing on the dotted line. God demands first place in our lives.

This is a difficult verse to hear because it sounds anti-family. In recent decades, we have seen the decline of the traditional family. Many of us have said, or have also heard, that one big reason for the decline of family is “not going to church”...and here, in church, we do not want to hear Jesus make it worse. His words sound disrespectful to parents, to elders, which also runs in conflict with our values.

This, however, is Semitic hyperbole. It is exaggeration for effect.

The word “hate” used here is misunderstood in our modern, common usage, and it is a common problem for our 21<sup>st</sup> century world’s attempts to understand these messages of his.

Think of it. If discipleship is loving everyone, including enemies and persecutors, it can hardly

be the case that Jesus would literally call disciples to hate those closest to them. He does not call us to **hate** father and other in the way that we understand the word, but instead calls us to a commitment above all other commitments, including commitment to family.

"Hate" in this context is rather a call to love family members less than Christ.

So the old family, the old order, will have to be broken and then fixed. That is the way the cross does everything. That is the way of real life in this world.

Broken and made whole again. The world breaks, and God makes whole again. All the time. Everytime.

The Eucharist is broken and given. "This is my body broken for you." The family, the world, everything has to experience that. Leonard Cohen says: "There is a crack in everything. That is how the light gets in."

The things that are most dear to us: mother and father, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, even life itself....those are all things we have...and we possess. Our tendency is to possess our lives as something we earn, or something we deserve...but we do not want to simply live our lives as a gift.

God tells us that life is not something to grasp after. But rather it is something to give away and then receive back as a free gift. How do we do that?

Well, the good news is that Jesus came and did it. Jesus became human like one of us and was able to desire, was able to love...not by possessing, or hoarding, or controlling, but by giving...even in the face of death when, in his last act, he gave his own spirit of life back to God....so it could be shared eternally with each of us.

Discipleship **does** carry a high price tag! But Jesus shows us how to do it...by giving up the all-too-human tendency of always "Looking out for Number 1". In the forgiving love of Jesus, we start on a journey of being empowered to truly love each other with lives that are a gift.

Life from God. All that we have. All of it...is a gift.

A gift to ourselves. A gift to each other. And a gift that we know in this life...and the next...from God who we know to be in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.