

September 8, 2019  
23<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—CYCLE C

### THINGS I WISH JESUS HAD NOT SAID

The Text: Luke 14:25-33

Did you catch the words of our Lord as recorded by Saint Luke in our Gospel lesson today? Listen to them again, *“If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”*

**WHAT????** “Hate father and mother, wife and children . . . or your cannot be my disciple!” Did Jesus really say that? Maybe Saint Luke wrote the quote down incorrectly? Or maybe it is one of those errors of transmission through the years as the words of Jesus were passed orally from person to person in the early years of the Church. And if Jesus really said this, what in the world did he mean? Does our Lord really expect, even command, those of us who would follow him as Christians to **hate** our closest family members as a prerequisite to discipleship? If so, this saying would certainly make anyone’s Top Ten List of “Things I wish Jesus had not said.” In fact, of all the enigmatic sayings of Jesus, this one might top the list.

Let me hasten to say, I do not think there is a mistake in the sacred text here. Think about it, if Jesus had not actually said this, what would possess a faithful Christian scribe writing or telling the story to later generations of believers to make up the words and place them on the lips of Christ? No, the fact this saying of our Lord **jars** us so, and **jerks** our attention like fingernails scratching on a chalkboard, is evidence enough that the saying is authentic. So we are left trying to wrestle with the question, “Why would Jesus say such a thing?”

There might be those who believe that to take the Bible seriously, we must take every word of the scripture literally. And although that sounds reasonable, when you read the various types of sayings in the scripture, both Old and New Testaments, you are quickly confronted by some sacred texts that cannot be taken literally, or that should not be taken so. For example, when Jesus says to pluck out the eye that lusts, is that a literal command? Sadly, some well-meaning believers have done just that through Christian history. But even if one took a knife and tore out his or her eye after committing lust, the other eye could still commit lust. And even if both eyes were removed, one's memory and imagination can still inspire and harbor lustful thoughts. It takes more than surgery to cure lust. So this command cannot be taken literally, even though it should be reflected upon seriously. Could it be that the same type of language is at work here in our Gospel reading for today? Could it be that we have another example of exaggerated speech, or hyperbole, on the lips of Jesus? Words carefully chosen to jolt us to attention, like an alarm clock or storm warning siren?

I think this is the case here. And in fact, this is not the only time we hear of Jesus employing **exaggerated speech** to drive home his point. And by the way, lest we recoil at such a speech pattern, remember that exaggerated speech is part of our everyday language still today, and yet no one gets confused by it, or tries to take it literally.

Coaches do it. *"I want you boys to run that play until your tongues drag the ground!"*

Mothers do it. *"I expect you to work your fingers to the bone, if you expect to receive your allowance this week!"*

Lovers do it. *"I cannot breathe when we are apart. I haven't slept a wink since you left!"*

See what I mean? And yet no one actually takes these sayings literally. Why would we act as if we had never heard of **hyperbole** when we hear it on the lips of Jesus? When he compares rich people entering heaven as more difficult than camels going through an eye of a needle, we had better hope he is using exaggerated speech. And when Jesus says that if a person had faith he could command a mountain to be cast into the sea, do you really think that is a literal test of faith? No, of course not! Again, it is exaggerated speech.

So, when Jesus utters this word about “hating” relatives in order to be a disciple, we should instantly adjust our thinking to the realm of exaggeration. That does not mean that we ignore such a statement, just that we do not take it literally. And the test for when a saying is exaggerated speech and not literal command is to check that saying against both common sense, and against other statements of scripture. Remember how often Christ himself commanded love for parents, as given in the Ten Commandments (see Mark 7:9-13, for example). When there is clear inconsistency with other sayings of Jesus, we should assume there is some type of idiom or exaggeration at work. Jesus does not command, or even tolerate, hate toward anyone, much less the closest circles of family. He did not even hate those who crucified him!

And this is precisely the point. Of all the relationships to cherish, immediate family is the most precious—parents, spouse, children, siblings. And the scripture is replete with encouragement to do so. In this saying, Jesus is deliberately picking the most precious of relationships, the highest of human loves, and suggesting that even **these great loves should pale in comparison to the love one has for God**. Only when the loves of a person’s life are in order, can that person truly be a disciple of Christ—that is, we love God first, and second we love our family. Anyone who puts the love of family, or the love of self,

or the love of country above the love and loyalty to God is not an obedient and mature disciple. Simple as that. But to drive home the point, Jesus uses an old **Jewish idiom**, the juxtaposition of **love and hate**, as a tool to emphasize the superiority of love for God, even over the greatest of human relationships. That idiom may trip us up, for it is not used in contemporary English speech. But the Bible is full of this juxtaposition of love and hate, and when it is used, we might translate the word “hate” as “loving less” (see Genesis 29:30-31; Deuteronomy 21:15-17; Malachi 1:2-3). The point here is to set two loves in comparison so that one supreme love so outshines the other that it makes the lesser love seem like no love at all—the way the sun’s light drowns out the light of the stars.

And so this is the point of our Lord. By selecting the greatest loves of human society he offers a backhanded compliment to those relationships. How much more should the love for God rank above our love of pizza, or our new I-Phone! But even so, Jesus still offers us a jarring statement that makes us scratch our heads, and search our hearts, to test if we really love God most of all, more than all other human loves. And that is the question that remains. Do we? And the people said: AMEN

*-Kate ‘Carney’ Dailey ‘Good Old Day’s’ Weekend  
First Methodist and First UCC will be with Trinity Lutheran this Sunday 9/8/2019*