

"Family Values"

Luke 14:25-35

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sister, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."
Whew!

What have we gotten ourselves into to say we follow this Jesus? As we transition from the end of what, for many, has been a relaxed summer? On this Sunday before "Friends and Family Sunday," when we intentionally invite people to come see how love is spoken here and that all are welcomed? In this time when church seeks to support families besieged by just about any adversity you can name: what is it that Jesus wants us to hear?

I once spoke with a colleague with about the same number of years in ministry as I. We were preparing for our Sunday sermons and I said I was preaching on this text. She said "Oh, my!" and – although the text comes up every three years in the lectionary cycle – she confessed she had never preached this text. I share that not to belittle her or to claim any special virtue for myself, but to illustrate how hard this text is even for those of us with the audacity to be spiritual leaders. Yet that is the very reason we must look at it. I have learned – and perhaps you have, too – that avoiding something often means there is something I need to examine. So let's take a look.

The immediate context of this saying is that Jesus is headed toward his death upon the cross. As early as chapter 9, Luke tells us that Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem." Jesus is on a one-way trip to Golgotha—"Skull Hill"—and its grim cross.

So when Luke tells us in verse 25 that "large crowds" are following Jesus, we can guess that not all of them are doing so for the right reason. Maybe he'll be a political Messiah. Maybe he'll even overthrow Caesar. Maybe they like his stories. Maybe it's just cool to be with someone so popular. The bigger the crowds, the more likely Jesus is being misunderstood.

So he uses strong, shocking language—hyperbole—to declare that his ministry is about the sacrificial love of God and that his disciples are to love this God above all. It's not the first place in the Gospels, and won't be the last, where the Jesus we sometimes describe as “meek and mild” is anything but that.

What about this word “*hate*?” It was a word forbidden in my home of origin and the home in which I raised my sons. Yet here is our Lord and Savior using it! Yet the word is more nuanced in the original New Testament Greek and had a somewhat different meaning for Jesus' hearers. The word is “*miseo*” meaning “to love less.” So we are to “*love less*” our family than our Lord God.

Cookies, too. We are to love cookies less than God. Where I grew up our next-door neighbors were “Aunt Dulcie and Uncle Lee.” They were the closest thing to blood relatives without the DNA. I was a social and a bit precocious pre-schooler, so my mother and Aunt Dulcie made a deal: I could stop by Aunt Dulcie's any time I wanted. If it was not a good time, she would say so and I would have to go home. If it was okay for me to stay, I could.

So this one day, my mother later told me, I went to see Aunt Dulcie. I was four years old, and part of why I tell this story is to remind our pre-school parents and grandparents of the spiritual awareness of your children and grandchildren. Aunt Dulcie was baking cookies. I loved cookies. Okay, I love cookies. Anyway, she let me stay. I asked her why she was baking cookies. She answered that Uncle Lee loved cookies. I thought for a moment and then said, “*Uncle Lee should love God more than cookies.*” So say we all!

Still the words shock. “Family Values” remain good fodder most of the time for churches, communities and election years. The words shock even more when we recall Christ's words about the sanctity of marriage, his strong warnings against adultery and divorce. He chided people who failed to observe the Fifth Commandment to honor father and mother, the first Commandment with a promise: “*that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God gives you.*” He scolded his own disciples who would have denied the little children to come to him. And he said we must love

our neighbors and even our enemies: surely then you ought to love your family, too!

So what's up? Is Jesus trying to worsen strained family relationships and ruin good ones? No. Is Jesus repudiating his own faith tradition about care of the family? No. Then what?

Jesus is being clear about the terms of following him. That's why he follows this saying with two parables about "counting the cost." Even the love and faithfulness given to our family must come second after our greater love for God and God's realm. This is as challenging in the first years of the 21st century as it was in the first years of the 1st century.

In fact, some of you may have had to face scorn from family who do not understand why you must spend Sunday in church. They call you names like "goody-two-shoes" and "holy roller." They are annoyed that you won't get drunk with them or tolerate speech and humor that is racist, sexist and homophobic. *"You have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back"* as one hymn says, and live by the power of God in your heart rather than the approval of family that has scorned God.

These are not easy battles but they are clear ones. I think most of us fight what might be called "spiritual guerrilla wars." What are the values with which we raise our children? Is a crime not a crime unless you are caught? If no laws were violated, is our behavior worthy of God? Can you apologize and seek forgiveness but not change or repent?

Do we understand clearly the cost?

Several weeks ago I asked you to remember our friend Marty and his family in prayer. Ten days ago Marty died after a six-month battle with ALS, Lou Gehrig's Disease. One of Marty's last requests, writing on a white board to his wife Terri when he could no longer speak, was to request that I deliver the sermon at his funeral.

To say that I am deeply honored is an understatement. Marty's example of discipleship to literally thousands of family, friends, parishioners and students—he was a university math professor—was an inspiration.

But Marty told me of a personal crisis in his early young adult life that shaped how he became a truly committed follower of Jesus. The crisis led him to seek spiritual counsel from a pastor. The pastor drew a circle on a piece of paper and then labeled parts of it: family, friends, hobbies and sports and professional career. The pastor then drew a picture of a chair in the middle of the circle. The question he asked Marty was: *"Who is sitting in the chair? You, or God?"* Marty answered, *"I am."* The pastor replied, *"You are not fully ready to follow until God is in the chair."*

That pivotal moment led to Marty putting God in the chair and serving as a missionary to the Congo and teaching at Mulungwishi Seminary before returning to the States and having his family.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to love God more and our family less. As is so often the case, the Gospel flips human wisdom upside down, since loving God more is the best way to also love your family to the fullest human measure possible. When we do, we discover the empty place in our heart is filled. We discover, as we sang just a few moments ago, *"strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow."* In fact, we discover the love of which Jesus spoke in another family values exchange: *"whoever does the will of God is my mother and my sister and my brother."* (Mark 3:35) Amen.