

BIBLE READING: Matthew 10:24-39

SERMON

As I listen to many Christians today I hear the words “family values.” They seem to believe that Jesus came to affirm values focused on the nuclear family - the mom, dad and 2 children version of family. This family is, according to Conservative Christianity, the center of ethical and moral teaching, and thus what Jesus came to preserve, protect, and promote.

Hmmmmm.....

Jesus was an itinerant preacher, who left his family and said some unpleasant things to his mother (John 2). When he was rejected in Nazareth his brothers and sisters came to do an intervention (Mark 6:3) - to scold him for bad behaviour. But Jesus shrugs off his family, and invites 12 male disciples to do the same. These men likely left behind wives and children. In fact, when one of these disciples asks to go home and bury his father - a sacred duty in Jewish tradition - Jesus says that in order to follow him, let the dead bury the dead (Matthew 8). One must pick up their Cross and follow Jesus - right now.

And then we have this reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is clearly setting up a frame of reference in which families are divided. Jesus boldly proclaims: “do not think that I have come to bring peace to earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. I have come to set a son against his father, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” (Matthew 10: 34-36)

Jesus turns our expectations upside down. Jesus foreshadows the kind of divisions that his followers would experience as they struggled within their Jewish (and Gentile) families.

Those reading Jesus’ words in the context of the early Church (and perhaps even the 21st century Church) would have found the divisions about which Jesus speaks to be reflective of their present reality. In both cases, the message is the same: families are going to be divided, and if you don’t like it, get off the Jesus train.

Think about the conversations about race for instance - or about keeping social distancing - let alone wearing a mask! Families can become very uncomfortable places to be!

The dominant voice in Conservative Christianity has been preaching about the sanctity of marriage and the importance of the family unit! Children need a strong father figure, and a mother who stays at home and cares for their emotional needs. Gays can’t have kids because it disrupts the traditional family unit! Single mothers should be ashamed for not providing their children with a solid Christian foundation at home. And those who dare to be child-free? They are selfish and not opening themselves to God’s plan!

Even those who are not Christian, have this romantic idealised version of family - a happy family. full of smiling healthy kids and two well-adjusted parents.

In this reading, Jesus is challenging just what the Christian “family” is. Families built on bloodlines will betray one another. Households - which in the ancient world were large and extended - would betray one another. The tribal bonds granted to us because of blood would be made secondary to a new bond - the one to Jesus Christ.

In the first part of our reading, Jesus describes the relationship between students and teachers, and slaves and masters. It’s not that the student or slave should surpass the teacher or master; rather, they are called to “be like” or emulate the teacher or master. We are those students and slaves, and we are called to imitate Christ. We’re called to boldly proclaim the Good News before others. But Jesus knows that this news doesn’t always sound good, and will divide whole communities - right down to father and son.

As Christians, we recognize that our allegiance has shifted. No longer are we to pledge ourselves primarily to family. Indeed, we are called to pick up our Cross and leave our family. What this looks like today is holding all of our relationships loosely, keeping Jesus as the primary relationship in our lives.

It also means we radically redefine family. No longer are parents and children the primary form of family. Jesus created a "found family" with 12 disciples of different ages, skills, and backgrounds. He created family with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He created family in an Upper Room. Biological bonds are replaced by the bonds of kinship in the great family of Jesus Christ.

What Jesus illustrates with these bold statements is the high cost of discipleship, and the radical reorientation of God's Kingdom compared with our own. We disciples are the students who are called to imitate the teacher. We are called to proclaim our faith publicly, before the world. We are also called to follow Jesus - to pick up the burden of the Cross - even as it divides our family. We are to find our life in Jesus, and not in the world.

Following Christ is radical. Living for Christ means that supporting institutions which privilege the few and oppress the many must be called out. It means that we stand up for Jesus' radical re-imagining of the world, even when it angers our parents, our siblings, our spouses, or our children. It means that we find new family members in the body of Christ - and that we see other Christians as siblings, not as strangers. The things that are said in darkness must and will be brought to light. It's a reminder that our culture's values and God's Kingdom values are not the same. And again, we disciples must choose who to follow.

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