

June 25, 2017
The Third Sunday after Pentecost

“Family Values”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 6:1-11 ~ Matthew 10:24-39

Each year when I was in Nekoosa we would hold a joint Sunday service with our brothers and sisters from the Methodist church in Port Edwards. It was a wonderful way to share our choirs and musicians, and the pastor from Port Edwards UMC and I shared the preaching. As he and I were talking about our plans for that day of joint celebration, we decided that he would address the Hebrew Scripture passage and that I would preach from the New Testament. That seemed like a great idea at the time ...until I actually read the passage in Matthew ... the one we heard today. If I had looked in a mirror as I was reading it I'm sure that I would have seen my expression change from expectation to “ugh.” I was sorely tempted to call him back and try and pull the old switcheroo, but after a while I settled myself down and decided that I could do it, but in the words of the great theologian Ricky Ricardo, I had some “splaining” to do.

Today's text is full of all sorts of good stuff from Jesus, each one worth its own sermon, I think. In the first section, Jesus tells us: “*it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the Master.*” Sometimes we get confused, Jesus suggests ... disciples thinking they are above their master ... or that they are the master. As Christians, we can get confused too ... thinking that we have to be Christ, instead of seeking simply to be Christ-like. We'd rather play God than serve God, and in the process, we hurt others and ourselves. Seek to be like the Master, Jesus urges ... and so we should seek to be imitators of Jesus.

The second section is a jumble of sayings isn't it? The part that sticks most clearly in my mind, though, is this ... “*are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from you Father. And even the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*” These words are so comforting. They say to me that in a life where we are defined by our numbers ... PIN numbers, Social Security Numbers, phone numbers, bank account numbers, and many more ... when who we are can be pared down so simply ... classified, categorized, and filed ... these words remind me that the One who created me still knows me better than I know myself and values me beyond my imagination. And values you. And values every single created thing with such intensity ... that each part of us ... each hair on our head is known to our God.

But finally we come to the hardest part of the passage. It's hard to deal with it in light of the words we've just examined. It's certainly hard to deal with after spending last Sunday celebrating Father's Day. It is this part that made me go, “ugh.” Jesus says, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have come not to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not*

worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

These words serve as a shocking wake-up call. We often hear the phrase “family values” tossed around these days, or even “biblical family values,” and I always wonder what people mean when they say that ... the Bible is home to some of the most dysfunctional families I know ... from Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers ... to Abraham trying to pass Sarah off as his sister instead of his wife ... to Rebekah scheming with her son to trick the other son out of his birthright ... to scandalous affairs like David and Bathsheba. And things aren't all that different in the gospels ... here we find Jesus once asking, “who is my mother?” when he's told that Mary is asking for him. We hear Jesus urging people to drop everything to follow him, even if it means that their family business might collapse ... and right here, in this morning's reading, telling his disciples they must turn against their closest relatives to be disciples. Family values indeed.

“I come not to bring peace, but a sword,” Jesus says. What is Jesus really saying? Can he possibly mean it? Is this the same person who talks frequently of the peace that he brings into our lives and hearts when we are in relationship with him? Later, when Jesus is being arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, he tells his disciples to put away their swords. *“Those who live by the sword will die by the sword,”* he says. This is the Jesus who refused to be the revolutionary leader that many wanted him to be. So he must mean something other than a vision of an armed Christ who breaks up families. How do we understand, and accept these words? To me it is amazing how one passage from the bible can contain words of such tenderness ... words about how much God values us ... and then contain words of such challenge and heartache ... like these that would divide us from those we love most.

Jesus is speaking in a time when discipleship carried greater risks than it does today, at least here in the United States. Then, to be a disciple of Jesus meant a completely new way of life. It meant almost certain persecution, and it meant traveling to preach the gospel ... literally going from village to village to talk about God's kingdom. No wonder families divided over such decisions of discipleship. Today, perhaps discipleship doesn't carry the same tangible requirements. Perhaps it is less overtly risky. But the sword that Jesus brings still calls us to challenge ourselves, and this sword is divisive and decisive. It cuts through with a clear identity. It's about purpose. This sword is the cutting edge that “cleaves between” what we have been, and what we are becoming. This sword signifies that knowing Christ has caused radical changes in our lives. God calls us to the edge of life ... the edge where we find ourselves with the least, the last, the lost ... and there at the edge ... we find our purpose. Our identity is Christ's mission in the world ... it is that purpose that binds us ... that names us ... nothing else. No matter what our words have been ... if the world is not different because you and I have come here ... then it's because you and I have put something other than Christ at the center of our lives. Jesus comes with a sword. The sword cuts to purpose, to results. And I believe that Jesus is extremely impatient for the results. He is impatient for the results because he is passionate about people. It is a divine, consuming love that cuts to the results.

It may have been more risky in Jesus' day to be a disciple, but there are those in our own lifetimes who have paid the price. We have only to think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Apart from his theological writings, Bonhoeffer is known for his staunch resistance to Nazi dictatorship, including vocal opposition to Hitler's euthanasia program and genocidal persecution of the Jews. He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo and imprisoned for a year and a half. Later he was transferred to a Nazi concentration camp. After being associated with the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, he was quickly tried and then executed by hanging on April 9, 1945 as the Nazi regime was collapsing.

We can remember Oscar Romero, who served as the fourth Archbishop of San Salvador, and spoke courageously against poverty, social injustice, assassinations, and torture. His ministry was distinguished by a particular attention to the most poor and marginalized. In 1980, he was assassinated while offering Mass in the chapel of the Hospital of Divine Providence.

Clarence Jordan is one of my all-time favorite Christians. He was an agriculture major at the University of Georgia and a Master of Divinity graduate of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he also earned a PhD in New Testament. Jordan founded the racially integrated Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia in 1942.

Just to be clear: 1942. You may be familiar with Jordan through his *Cotton Patch* translations of the New Testament or because the "Habitat for Humanity" movement originated from the Koinonia Farm.

To my mind, Jordan's heroism came through in his sense of humor. Once accused of fraternizing with Myles Horton, a reputed communist, Jordan retorted, "I really have trouble with your logic. I don't think my talking to Myles Horton makes me a Communist any more than talking to you right now makes me a jackass."

Likewise, when the Koinonia community tried selling peanuts from a roadside stand the Ku Klux Klan dynamited the stand. Stubborn like most saints for justice, Jordan put up another stand. It was blown up too. Finally, the Koinonia Farm resorted to mail-order ads. Their slogan was "Help us ship the nuts out of Georgia."

The stories of Bonhoeffer, Romero and Jordan range from comic hope to mortal contemplation, and they call the church to imagine the possibilities of faithful discipleship and the dangers that attend it.

If we are looking for a way to be more comfortable with Jesus' words today, there aren't any easy solutions. But we can remember that the same Jesus who makes us squirm in our seats also speaks to us with such compassion about God's great love for us. Always challenging, and always comforting ... because Jesus loves us and he does not want us to not settle for what is less than the best for which God has called us.

Jesus takes the values and presuppositions of this world and turns them upside down and inside out! The way up with God, for instance, is down. Humility lifts one up while arrogance puts one down! The first, he says, will be last. That is, those who buy the line that "Looking Out for

Number One," is the way to success will ultimately discover that looking out for number one actually delivers a person to last place. The world says that the one who has lots of servants is great while Jesus says that the one who serves a lot is great! The world says he who saves and invests all in the markets of this world will be secure while Jesus says the one who gives up the treasure of this world will have the ultimate security ... namely "treasure in heaven."

And because we are precious and counted as loved, Jesus wants us to experience the life of discipleship that promises rewards that nothing else offers. There is a profound promise here and it confounds the world. When you surrender your life to Christ you cannot lose. For "those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Christ's sake will find it." Amen.

May we pray?

Gracious God, it's not easy doing what you've asked us to do, but because you go with us, we dare to submit ourselves to your work in our lives. We thank you for your Holy Spirit which allows us to have courage to stand firm, to die to ourselves, to rise to you, and to do the work you have called us to. In the name of Jesus, the living and resurrected Lord, we pray. Amen.