

Proper 7A 2020 Sermon

Matthew 10:37-39

... “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.”

It’s not one of those passages in the Bible that gets quoted very often – and I can understand why! The love of father, mother, daughter, son are some of the strongest of all human loves. It’s hard for us to even entertain the **possibility** that we must *subordinate* our love for parent or child to anything else, even to God. Father, mother, daughter, son – these we have *seen* and *known* and held tightly in our arms; but God? None of us has ever seen God, or held God in our physical arms. To many of us, I think, God is so high above us and beyond us that we really don’t know what it would *mean* to **love** this transcendent, ineffable Being. So what we often do is love our *conception* of God, our idea of God; or love our feelings of being holy. And of course, if you are at all like me, because we human beings tend to unconsciously think the world revolves around us (that’s how our egos work), it is easy to confuse **God** with myself, my ego, my group, my tribe, my religion, my Bible, my nation – *whatever* I feel strongly attached to and identify with. What Jesus is saying to us in today’s Gospel is that if we love *any* of these – father, mother, son, daughter, self, group, religion, Bible, nation – if we love any of these *more* than we love Him, more than we love God, then we are not worthy of Him; not worthy of God. Our love is dis-ordered.

How can we *tell* if our love is disordered? One way is, if I think or feel that “God is on my side,” or “God is on the side of my group or my nation,” with the implication that I somehow “have” God – if this is the way I think or feel, then it is a clear sign that my love is disordered, and I am not worthy of Him. If I think or feel that because I **call** myself a Christian, or have been baptized, or have ‘accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior,’ or have perfect attendance at Sunday worship, or believe that the Bible is the literal Word of God, that **this**, somehow makes me worthy of him, it is a sure sign that my love is disordered. If I cling to my “rights” while not subordinating those rights to the love of God and neighbor and the greater good of the world, it is a clear sign that my love is disordered, and I am not “worthy of” Jesus.

Jesus continues, “...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.” To take up my cross, which is an instrument of death, means I willingly die to myself – my “false self,” my ego self – in order that I might live the True Life, in Christ. I hand over *my* will and submit to God’s will. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, “Father, if it be thy will, take this cup from me; nevertheless, **thy** will, not mine, be done.” That is the heart, the attitude of being a Christian. Thy will, not mine, be done. And yet, my friends,

how often do I strive and shout and push and manipulate so that *my* will be done? How often do you do this? When we do, our loves are disordered. Jesus tells us to take up our cross and *surrender* our self-will to God's will. "*Thy* will be done on earth," he taught us to pray. Jesus calls us to let go of the kingdoms of **this** world, with all their injustices and inequalities and lack of love and compassion, and "seek first the kingdom of **God** and *his* righteousness." And let's not fool ourselves, my friends! The Kingdom of God is a very *different* kingdom than any of the kingdoms or nations of this world; and it is ordered not on an individual's struggle for personal gain or to claim one's "rights," but rather on *surrendering* our lives out of love for God and neighbor.

We hear a lot these days about our rights: our right to own a gun, our right to wear a mask or not if we so choose, our right to return to our gyms and bars and movie theaters and bowling alleys and church buildings. It's in our American blood: our nation was founded in part on the "inalienable rights" of "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." We rebelled against "taxation without representation," and against the establishment of any one state church. We established a kingdom on earth in which freedom, individual rights, and the pursuit of our individual happiness were fundamental values.

But the values of the Kingdom of God are *very* different. "Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus says. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (*Matthew 5:38-45*)

I don't need to tell you that those are **not** the values of the kingdoms of **this** world.

And yet, the *deeper* truth is that the values of the kingdoms of this world do *not* lead to freedom! Dr. James Finley, a psychologist and spiritual director, writes, "Our deepest freedom rests not in our freedom to do what **we** want to do but rather in our freedom to *become* who God **wills** us to be... God created us *for* freedom; that is to say, God created us for [God's] self."¹

Richard Rohr puts it this way: "The freedom Jesus promises involves *letting go* of our **small** self, our cultural biases, and even our fear of loss and death. Freedom is letting go of wanting more and better things; it is letting go of our need to control and manipulate God and others. It is even letting go of our need to know and our need to be right—which we only discover with maturity. We become ever more free as we let go of our three primary motivations: our need for power and control, our need for safety and security, and our need for affection and esteem.

“Authentic spirituality... is about finding **true** freedom. It offers us freedom from our smaller selves as [the] reference point for everything or anything. This is the necessary Copernican Revolution wherein we change reference points. We discover that we are not the center of the universe any more than the Earth is. We no longer feel the need to place our own thoughts and feelings in the center of every conversation or difficulty.

“...The big and full world does not circle around any one of us. Yet so many refuse to undergo this foundational enlightenment, [and that refusal] leaves them much **less** free than they want to be.”² The cross of Jesus is a symbol both of his own willingness to pour out his life in love for the world, *and* our own **refusal** of that gift: for it was humanity’s refusal of Jesus’ gift of his life that led to the cross. “Jesus’ cross is erected in the spiritual tension between divine love and human refusal,”³ Fr. John Shea writes.

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Reflecting on these words of Jesus, Fr. Shea writes, “...If [Jesus’] disciples **find** their life within the present roles and positions of society, roles and positions that do **not** acknowledge the revelation of God in Jesus, they will *lose* the **deeper** life of communion with God. However, if they **lose** that *socially* approved but spiritually vacant way of life because they are committed to the revelation of God in Jesus, then they will **find** the *deeper* life of truth, grace, and justice that Jesus makes available by following him. When *societal* life is **lost** because of following Jesus, *spiritual* life is **gained**. Once again, there is a need to choose where you will place your ultimate loyalty.”⁴

Yes, my friends, it is hard. Very hard. For father, mother, son, daughter are our own flesh and blood, and to subordinate our love for them to anything or any one – even God – is difficult! And we swim in a society in which, let’s face it, we white, middle-class Americans have it pretty good. And, without being the slightest bit conscious of it, we imbibe, each day, the values of this society in which we swim: including the value of each person or group wanting the upper hand over and against the “other” person or the “other” group. And we have come to define “freedom” as my right to have what I want and do what I want, with little, or no, regard for the greater common good or compassion for the most vulnerable.

“No one can serve two masters,” Jesus teaches in his Sermon on the Mount. “Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (*Matthew 6:24*)

In today's Gospel, Jesus is asking us to **choose** between the kingdoms of *this* world and the Kingdom of God. He is asking us to place love for Himself and for God above all the other loves and strong attachments and identifications which so many of us have unconsciously put at the center of our lives – including love of parents, children, religion, group, and nation. It is, as Richard Rohr said, a Copernican revolution, a change from having ourself, our family, our group, our nation at the center of the world, to having the God of every nation, tribe, religion, indeed, of all the universe, firmly at the center of our lives.

Who, or what, lies at the center of our life, around which our whole world turns? Our choice will determine if we are worthy of Jesus, and if we are, truly, free.

AMEN

1 “Freedom: An Infinite Possibility of Growth,” Richard Rohr’s daily email meditation for Monday, June 15, 2020 <https://cac.org/freedom-an-infinite-possibility-of-growth-2020-06-15/>

2 “The Truth Will Set You Free,” Richard Rohr’s daily email meditation for Sunday, June 14, 2020 <https://cac.org/the-truth-will-set-you-free-2020-06-14/>

3 John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 214

4 Shea, *ibid.*, pp. 214-215