

LOST AND FOUND A Father's Day Sermon

Today is my first Sunday to be with you after nearly three weeks of vacation. I am grateful for that time of refreshment and re-creation. I rested, exercised, watched movies and read, whenever I wanted. Some of the time I spent with Eyleen, some of the time I was alone. My vacation began with a road trip, a visit to my daughter and my son.

Four years ago this month, I left the mid-West for the mid-South. Each time I travel back to Lawrence, Kansas, to see John, and to Evanston, Illinois, to see Hannah, I become aware that so much of my story was written in those small cities. And yet, except for the presence of my children there, I realize more and more how those places feel less and less like home. I cannot fully describe to you just how bittersweet this is! An exercise in losing and finding, you might say.

The crux of the Gospel, the core teaching of Jesus, the heart of the Christian message, can be found in the 39th verse of Matthew's tenth chapter, the last verse we heard read today. It is a teaching found with slight variation in all four Gospel accounts. For those who missed it, and for those like me who always benefit from hearing it again, here it is: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Memorable words, confusing words, difficult words. What does Jesus mean? We can look back a few verses to try and find some context, but we don't get a whole lot of help there, either. "Do not think I have come to bring peace...for I have come to set (sons) against...father(s) and daughter(s) against...mother(s)...and one's own foes will be members of one's own household" (10:34-36). That's just like Jesus, to talk in what seems like circles. Why doesn't he just come right out and say what he means?

Biblical scholarship suggests that, in Jesus' world, family was everything. Family *was* your identity. Your status inside and outside your family determined your place in the world – your work, your vocation, whom you could and couldn't marry, where you could and couldn't live, how and where you worshiped, your political loyalties. This "family first" mentality was particularly intense among those at the top of the power pyramid. Ruling families guarded their status as if life depended on it ...because it did.

Think about how much your family means to you, how important "your people" are, and then multiply that ten times. Consider, also, what this would mean for those first disciples. If their primary attachment, their full allegiance was to their family, how could they follow this wandering preacher who was always stirring things up? It would mean they couldn't be a *real* member of their own family any more.

When Jesus says, "whoever loves father or mother...or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (John 10:37), he is preaching heresy. He is rocking the disciples' world. He is also inviting them to a life of freedom from the rigid dictates of

obligation, a life requiring they grow up and be responsible for who they are and who they will become. Jesus seems to be saying that blood is indeed not thicker than water, at least not the waters of Baptism.

The word scholars use to describe this attitude toward family relationships is “dyadic.” It means that, in order to know who you are and whose you are, you look externally, outside yourself. But Jesus comes along and dares to say that the kingdom of God is *within* you – that if you want to know who you are and whose you are, look inside yourself. In other words, life is an inner journey, not a road trip.

Throughout Matthew’s Gospel account, Jesus keeps redefining family. Earlier in this chapter he tells his disciples that following him will mean that “children will rise against their parents” (10:21). One day, when they tell him that his family wants to speak to him, he asks, “Who is my mother, and who is my brother? Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and my sister and my mother” (12:48-50). Jesus says these things because he knows that family members, even when they are well-intentioned, can be the very ones to keep us from becoming who God wants us to be.

But the Gospel is even harder to hear than that. Jesus doesn’t just redefine family. He redefines life. He teaches, and then he lives the Gospel. Love as I have loved. Let go of everything. Relinquish all your comforts – your security, your safety. Surrender your power, privilege and prestige. Give up control. Trust in God. Believe.

For two thousand years Jesus has been calling his disciples to forsake all other attachments, to follow him. What might that actually look like for you and me? Improbable as it may seem, Hollywood can help us understand what Jesus was getting at.

I realized over my vacation that most movies I see are about relationships. Lately they seem to be specifically about fathers and sons. Batman, Cinderella Man, even Million Dollar Baby have something to do with the relationship men have with their sons or with those for whom they take some kind of responsibility. After seeing Star Wars: Episode III, I thought about going again. Then I opened the paper and saw the advertisement. All those fathers taking their sons this weekend would receive, free while supplies last at participating theaters, a poster with a picture of Darth Vader and the caption: “Who’s Your Daddy?” It helps to know, of course, that Darth Vader, Lord of the Dark Side, is the daddy of Luke Skywalker, the Chosen One.

Because the Star Wars episodes have been released over a quarter of a century and out of sequence, the new Episode III makes more sense if you see IV, V and VI as well. In Episode V, Luke discovers the dark truth about his father. In the final episode, his father reveals an even deeper secret: that he still loves his son enough to save his son’s life from the Dark Side. The father does this, so that his son might in turn redeem his father with that son’s own final, loving acts. Despite the pain, despite facing the fear of being destroyed by his own father, Luke finds a way to “bear the burden of his (father’s) un-lived life” (Carl Jung). He grows up and. As Wordsworth put it, he becomes

“father of the man.” Even though he has never known his father’s love, Luke loves him enough to risk losing his life, in order to find the larger life to which he has been called.

Back in our own, real world, author James Hollis suggests that few parents are able to give unconditional love to their children, because they never received it themselves. “What would happen,” he asks, “to our lives, to our world, if the parent could unconditionally affirm the child, saying in so many words,”

“You are precious to us; you will always have our love and support; you are here to be who you are; try never to hurt another, but never stop trying to become yourself as fully as you can; when you fall and fail, you are still loved by us and welcomed to us, but you are also here to leave us, and to go onward toward your own destiny without having to worry about pleasing us” (p. 132).

“How history would change!” Hollis says. How, indeed! Our own, personal stories, the stories of our community and of the church and even the story of the world would change! Perhaps one’s own foes, even one’s family, would become one’s friends.

The sword of which Jesus speaks in our Gospel lesson today is the Gospel itself. After 9/11, Thomas Keating, grandfather of the Contemplative Outreach movement, said: “At this point in history there probably is no sharper cutting edge than your own commitment, unto death, if necessary, to the pursuit of divine (and human) companionship...with everyone else in the human family, even to the point of sharing their suffering” (CO annual meeting, 2004). Jesus said it simply: “love one another, as I have loved you.” Only love will yield the peace of Christ. Yet that peace may feel like a sword, slashing through our resistance, surpassing all our understanding.

Jesus is always calling us out of something old into something new. Jesus keeps calling us to trust God and to let go, to surrender our familiar, comfortable ways, to become uncomfortable with our “cozy domestic arrangements” (*The Message*), to lose our old life as we have known it for a new life, a life we could never on our own have ever imagined life to be. Poet Mary Oliver says that “To live in this world you must do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it, and, when the time comes, to let it go, to let it go” (“In Blackwater Woods”).

Bitter as it always is to say goodbye to them, my time with John and Hannah was sweet. Over coffee John poured out his heart about his dreams and his loves. Hannah and I had our first real conversation about her hopes for college. This Father’s Day, my hope and my dream is that I can love my children unconditionally – that I can support them, challenge them, praise them, forgive them – and then, that I can let them go – that I can be willing, in a manner of speaking, to lose them, so that they will find, with God’s help, their own way. My prayer for them is that they might be free of the need to please me or anyone else. My prayer is that they might be free simply to live their lives, losing and finding themselves, all the while loving others, as Jesus loves them. Might this be our prayer for all our loved ones – and, perhaps, for all the people of this world?

