

“Give Up Your Possessiveness”

Scripture

Luke 14:25-33

²⁵Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.” ³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. ³⁴“Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? ³⁵It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

Micah 6:8

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

I was trying to get at what in the world I could say about loving kindness and family in our very difficult Gospel text when Anne Lamott held up a picture for me so that I could see. In contrast to Jesus’ hard saying, the picture is one of Lamott happily holding hands with her mom. **“I am looking over at her with enormous gentleness [that] I sometimes feel,”** she says. **“I hold her hand and feel that my heart could break with love for her.”**

The picture was taken at Stenson Beach, up the coast on the north side of the Golden Gate Bridge above San Francisco. The place is just over the hill from where I went to seminary in San Anselmo, California, so I could see it in my imagination, quite well, making it even more endearing. But here’s the rub. As soon as she holds it up and remembers her feeling of love that day, it also brings to mind what else she felt. “Ten minutes later I found myself growling at her when she was out of earshot [after she sent me off to be her errand girl, coming back to her sitting on the sand] waiting to return with her lipstick.”

As the still photograph becomes a movie in her mind, Lamott remembers: “I was annoyed. I was annoyed in general because she is not at all whom I would have picked at the Neiman-Marcus Mommy Salon. I would have chosen someone tall, elegant and physical. I would have chosen someone with a ferocious belief in herself and God and me. I would have chosen someone who did not give a [thought to] what other people thought of her or her children.” More

specifically “I was annoyed that day because she acted so much older than she is. She was only seventy-three, but she staggered along in the sand like a toddler.” In fact, Lamott is holding her mom’s hands in the picture to steady her. She feels quite unsteady on the sand. “She is so needy,” Lamott complains. “She needs me to pull her to her feet when she’s been sitting down, needs to grip my hand tightly when she walks as though we are on a tightrope instead of a beach. I secretly believed that she could do better if she tried, that—perhaps this sounds paranoid—she acts this way to torture and control me.”

In her picture with her mother, Anne Lamott holds up the deep-seated ambiguity of family life – the love and the loathing, the reaching out and the pulling back, our moves toward independence and that frequent return to the latent yearning for contact. And in holding that up, here is what she sees. Instead of having had the relationship she might have wanted with a woman from the Neiman-Marcus Mommy Salon, she reflects on the possibility that she has spent “time with Jesus in his distressing guise as my mother.” “Who was it who said that forgiveness is giving up all hope of having had a different past?” she asks. And then she posits: “I think that’s why most of us stay close to our families, no matter how neurotic the members, how deeply annoying or dull—because when people have seen you at your worst, you don’t have to put on the mask as much. And that gives you license to try on that radical hat of liberation, the hat of self-acceptance; we’re allowed to escape from underneath one of the fatwas.” Ann Lamott sees all this in a picture she holds up, holding her mother’s hands at Stinson Beach.

As disturbing as it may sound that Jesus says that we must “hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, to be his disciple,” I don’t believe that he means something so wholly different than what Anne Lamott tells about her relationship with her mother. As I read the commentaries about what “hate” means in this passage I saw such things as this: “To hate is a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from. There is nothing of that emotion we experience in the expression ‘I hate you.’”¹ “‘Hating’ father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even one’s own life—does not prescribe the emotion we know as ‘hatred,’ or in the case of one’s own life, self-hatred or contempt. Rather it means ... not being so attached to them that their well-being, or even one’s own survival, is one’s first priority.”² I’m not trying to explain the word, “hate,” away by these references. In the passage, Jesus is asking the crowds of followers (which means us) to count the cost of discipleship. Beyond initial enthusiasm, following Jesus asks for a reprioritizing of one’s life’s values. You don’t build a building wanting to stop in the middle of construction. You don’t choose to go into a battle with masochistic goals of losing. Big projects demand prioritizing one’s commitments. And following Jesus is our greatest, most compelling, calling in life. Nothing is more important. And the hard saying here about hating one’s family, oneself, what one has “is powerful,” says one commentator, “precisely because one’s own life and

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, p. 181.

² Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion, p. 201.

family relationships *are* a baseline of one's personal security and identity."³ Yet, upon making that commitment, what we find is that this is the way also that can lead to how one loves one's family and oneself in a godly way.

A couple of Mondays ago, I was staining my front porch and listening to some music as I did so. Earlier I had cleaned out some CDs from my car that I had not listened to much and so I picked one of these to play while I worked. A movie soundtrack had an old Marvin Gaye song on it, which brought me immediately to mind of today's sermon. The lyrics go like this: "Father stop criticizing your son. Mother please leave your daughters alone. Don't you see that's what wrong with the world today, what's wrong with the world today? Everybody wants somebody to be their own piece of clay."

If we love Jesus, if we see Jesus in the guise of our mother's dress, we get out of the trap of shopping for parents at Neiman-Marcus Salons or of modeling our children into our image as if they were a piece of clay. If we love Jesus we have what we want and we are free to love others for who they are. Some in our church have been taking a class offered both on Sunday and Wednesday mornings called *Active Parenting*. It's a wonderful course that I have enjoyed teaching before, myself, and as I have taught, I have learned such valuable lessons. Its premise is that our children are developing their own sense of character and value. To help them gain characteristics of courage, self-esteem, responsibility, cooperation and respect, we have a compelling teaching and leading role. It's a risky and compelling calling to be a parent, and we perform best when we don't necessarily get hooked in to dynamics of dependence nor of withdrawal. Instead of being reactive, we respond in measured ways that will help them learn ways of being people of character themselves. My approach to this class is to remember Jesus' call, to say that we must love him first, so that we can be at ease enough to love others as those similarly loved by God, to not be possessed by our possessions, but count things as of lesser importance than the relationship we can have with the world's Creator and our Savior. By this call to hate our family, ourselves, what we have, we are called to give up our possessiveness of these things, and to understand them as are all things, belonging to God. Freely we have received, and so we can freely give. In such a way, the hatred Jesus asks us to have for family, is really a way to love. Amen.

³ Ibid.