
Who Do We Think We Are?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 7 – Year A

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come 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." (Matthew 10:34-36)

Now, I know what you're thinking. This is exactly why we don't talk about politics or religion at the dinner table!

I facilitated a group discussion about these verses once. It began with a woman saying in all seriousness, "I don't need Jesus to create conflict between me and my mother-in-law. It seems to appear all on its own!"

I get it. These verses don't seem to offer the good news that we expect to hear from Jesus. Stay with me, though. I don't think that these verses are about breaking down the family as much as they are about building up our capacity to be in relationship with God and each other.

I think Jesus is reminding his disciples that their identity doesn't come from their families. It comes from God. You will remember that the family structure Jesus is talking about is as much about power as it is about relationship. The family was the primary source of security, wealth, and opportunity for the disciples. This is why the scriptures are constantly reminding us to take care of widows and orphans.

Jesus is reminding the disciples that, as they begin to live into their identities as children of God, their attachment to their family identities will begin to die. This is threatening to other members of the family who are depending on those identifications. What feels like a gain to the disciples may feel like a loss to their families who quite naturally will resist it where they can. No good deed goes unpunished.

Count the cost, Jesus seems to be saying. The disciples are going to have to be prepared for, learn how to identify, and be able to skillfully deal with resistance and even sabotage. They will have to learn to trust completely in God.

Again, it's not about breaking down the family. It's about the disciples building up their capacity to be in relationship with God and everybody else. The family is where they started, but it is not where they will end. In other words, the family is not where they should go to be given their identity; it is where they came from to discover their identity.

We can see what this change in perspective looks like in Jesus' own family. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are constantly differentiating themselves from the expectations of their extended and nuclear families. They seem to understand that, to usher in the Kingdom of God, they must pull away from the togetherness forces of their family structures so that they will be available for relationships with God and everybody else.

Mary, for example, refuses to be defined by the shame that must have accompanied her pregnancy. You can hear it in the exuberance of her song, which we call the Magnificat. She believes herself to be the "handmaiden of the Lord." (Lk. 1:38) and her meeting with her cousin Elizabeth, who is also unexpectedly pregnant, is marked by joy and celebration.

Joseph refuses to divorce the unexpectedly pregnant Mary. It's not hard to imagine that his family might have

preferred that he think more about their reputation and less about the opinions of a voice that he heard in a dream!

Luke tells a story about the twelve-year-old Jesus who goes to Jerusalem with his family for the Feast of Passover and then stays in the Temple for three days after his family leaves for home. When his mother Mary expresses how anxious she was to find him, Jesus says, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" (Lk. 2:49)

Mark tells a story of Mary and her other sons coming to "take charge" of Jesus because they thought he was "out of his mind" (Mk. 3:21), maybe because, since he is the eldest son, they are supposed to be his first priority. When he learned of their presence, Jesus says, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Then, gesturing at his disciples, he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Mk. 3:31-35)

Jesus even says no to would be followers who are not able to differentiate themselves from their families. He rejects the request of some to take care of family obligations first. "Follow me," he says, "and let the dead bury their own dead." (Mt. 8:22) He lets the rich young man walk away, despite clearly caring for him, when the young man can't give away his family's wealth to the poor. (Mt. 19:16-22)

In case we didn't get the point, Jesus follows the verses that we are considering now with a stern warning. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Mt. 10: 37-39)

You might think that this self-differentiation would weaken Jesus's family relationships, but it seems to have strengthened them. Reaching out to serve others seems to have generated stronger and more intimate relationships than pulling back to protect themselves from others would have done. Mary is there at the foot of the cross when Jesus surrenders the last bit of his identity to God. Jesus' brother, James, becomes the first bishop of the church in Jerusalem and, according to tradition, is martyred for his faith.

We don't think of our families today in quite the same way that they did when Jesus was commissioning his disciples or when the gospel writers were fashioning Jesus' instructions into teachings for the early Christian communities. So, what are we to take from these verses? Do they still have something to say to us?

I think we might answer this question by asking another one.

Who do we think we are?

If someone asked you who you are, what would you say?

Most of us would tell them our name or say something about where we came from or who our people are. In many ways, things haven't changed as much as we sometimes think.

If the conversation continues, we might say something modest about what we have done or what other people say about us or the experiences we have had.

If the conversation lasts long enough, we might say something about what we believe or more likely what we don't believe!

If you think about it, though, you realize that these answers don't identify who we are. They are just descriptions of us. They describe how we think other people see us or, more likely, how we want other people to see us. You might even say that they are just projections of our own mind. They could all change or even go away and we would still be there.

So, who are we really?

The Christian contemplative tradition has long held that we are not the one who is seen from the outside. We are the one who is seeing from the inside. You might call it a witnessing presence. We look out at ourselves and the world and are aware of the events, thoughts, and emotions that pass before us. They are like the weather passing across the face of a mountain. Over time, we also become aware that we are not what we are

watching. When the weather changes, we are still there aware that things are different. If, however, you were to take away the witnessing presence, then there would be nothing there. There would be no “we.”

Meister Eckhart, a medieval German writer, calls this witnessing presence the Ground of the Soul. He says it is like a living fountain that we have filled in with dirt. Once it is covered up, we might not recognize it or even be aware of it. It remains alive, though, and when the dirt is taken away, the water flows again just like it did from the living wells of Abraham after they were uncovered.

Meister Eckhart also says that this is where we find God. He encourages us to let go of all in us that is not God until a spark of awareness awakens us. He calls this awakening the Birth of God in the soul. This union with God yields a new way of knowing which allows us to resemble God and, to a certain extent, become like him. This is the identity Jesus is calling his disciples to live into when he says in Matthew that they must be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt. 5:48)

When we learn to let go of the descriptions of how we are different from each other, we discover that we all share the same universal consciousness. This sense of oneness is the true source of our identity and, I believe, the only thing that will bring us real fulfillment. It's what we have always wanted. It's just hard to trust in God enough to give up those differentiating descriptions that we have been clinging to for so long. We even resist letting others give them up. It's no wonder, really. It is literally the death of what we thought was us.

Margaret Silf, a contemporary teacher of Ignatian spirituality, offers a meditation on what it's like to follow this path of giving up and letting go. She describes herself as living in a stone cottage on the banks of a wide river. The cottage is her home. It protects her from the predators when they stalk the shoreline and the river when it runs too wild or too cold. Yet, she says she feels a longing to cross over the river and walk on the other side.

One day she walks out on a stepping-stone that she sees in the river. She feels the water swirling around her feet. She can't see the other side of the river, even when she strains her eyes, but she can feel God's unseen presence. She doesn't see any way forward, so she just stands there.

As she breathes, she feels God beside her silently placing the next stone in front of her and inviting her to take another step.

This process continues and she comes to trust it until one day God is a little late. She turns in anticipation and sees Jesus on the bank of the river. He appears to be looking for just the right stone. Then she realizes what he has been doing. He has been taking down her cottage, one stone at a time, and using the stones to build up the path that she has been following. He has, she says, been dismantling her Kingdom, bit by bit, to provide her with the way to discover the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is instructing his disciples about identity. It's not about the acquisition of power in the sense of being able to control events or other people. It's about an attitude that they need to develop within themselves by letting go of the descriptions that separate them from other people and descending into the Ground of the Soul which is the same in all of us. There they will encounter Christ as a living, active force, in the present moment.

And so it is for us.

We are not called just to follow Christ or to believe in Christ.

We are called to become Christ.