

Family Guys and Disciples – Kent Dunnington

Luke 14:25-33

“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.”

This is a hard saying. It's been said that there are scriptures that comfort the disturbed and there are scriptures that disturb the comfortable. It's pretty clear what kind of scripture this is. Jesus is attacking the one thing we thought everyone, whether on the political left or right, could agree on: those good old-fashioned family values, on which we've come to rely. In one of John Updike's novels, Pastor Ned Bork describes one of his parishioners as “considerably to the right of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” When we hear this text, we discover that all of us are considerably to the right of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“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.” Who is Jesus talking to here? He's not talking to his disciples, those who know that he occasionally says things that sound a little off-putting. No, he's talking to the growing masses of people who are being drawn to him on his journey to Jerusalem, a journey we know ends on a cross. This is just bad recruiting: to attack the one thing that everyone in Jesus' culture—just like everyone in American culture—holds dear: family values. Understandably, many turned away from Jesus when they heard this hard saying. They saw that, as Teresa reminded us last week, Jesus was calling them to a standard that set them in contrast to the culture in which they lived; they saw that Jesus called them to an abnormal way of life.

But what does this hard saying mean? We may be helped to know that the Greek word for hate, *miseo*, does not have the emotional connotations that our word hate does. It does not include hostility or rage. Rather, if you *miseo* someone, you detach yourself from them, you disavow a primary allegiance to them, you clarify that they are, at most, a secondary priority. There is an OT background to this NT use of hate. You remember that many of the patriarchs loved one wife and “hated” the others. You remember that Yahweh loved Jacob and “hated Esau.” So clearly Jesus is not saying that Jesus-followers must dislike our families, or have-ill will toward them, or disregard their need for our care. This would make nonsense of Jesus' call to love everyone, and it would make nonsense of passages like 1 Timothy 5:8 where we are told that “whoever does not provide for... family members, has denied the faith.”

What a relief! So maybe all that Jesus is saying here is that, in those rare cases where you may be forced to choose between saying yes to God and saying yes to a family member, you should say yes to God and no to your family member. Like, if your family member asks you to steal something, or murder someone, or vote democrat, you should say no.

But then, if this is all that Jesus is saying, why does he use such strong language? It would have seemed especially strong then as well. Indeed, Matthew seems to have cleaned it up a bit, replacing “hate” with “love less.” And there’s nothing in the text to suggest that we only need to mislead family members when they’re being bad. We’re just told that we must mislead them to be a disciple. So we’re left with this question: why does Jesus come on so strong, exactly at this point where family is involved? Exactly where we thought Jesus and the best of middle class values would coincide, he tells us to hate our families. Why?

Because, in America, as in the culture of Jesus’ day, we don’t just care for our families. We don’t just honor them, as the Ten Commandments tell us, and provide for their basic needs, as 1 Timothy tells us. No, in America, as in the culture of Jesus’ day, we focus on the family. Family is like a set of lenses that makes the world look a certain way to us. Family sort of sets the boundaries for us between what is obviously good and what is obviously suspect. In America, family is the defining feature of what sociologists call our social imaginary.

That’s a fancy word, but an important one, so let me try to illustrate the way a social imaginary works with an episode from the greatest sitcom of all time, Seinfeld. The example is a little indecent, but it paints a vivid picture of how bound all of us are by a social imaginary. Jerry, the main character, has run into a dilemma. It seems that his girlfriend has made a friendly suggestion that she would be happy to invite a third person into their intimate encounters. When George, Jerry’s pathetic sidekick, learns of this, good pagan that he is, he is ecstatic. He cannot believe Jerry’s luck. But Jerry says, “I can’t do it! I can’t! I’m not an orgy guy!” George cannot believe it. He’s yelling at Jerry, “Are you crazy?! This is like discovering plutonium by accident!” But Jerry explains: “Don’t you know what it means to become an orgy guy? It changes everything. I have to dress different, I have to act different, I have to grow a mustache and get all kinds of robes and lotions. I’d need a new bedspread, new curtains, I’d have to get thick carpeting and weirdo lighting, plus I’d have to get new friends, I’d have to get orgy friends. No, I’m not ready for it.”

Jerry is running up against his social imaginary. It’s the way we see the whole world, the things that are possible for us and the things that aren’t possible for us, the things that are obvious for us and the things that are completely absurd. He’s not an orgy guy! He’s a regular guy, and he can’t wrap his head around the kind of total life makeover that would be necessary to be an orgy guy.

Now to return to our holy text, Jesus, with his intentionally strong language of hate, is exposing our social imaginary. When we hear it, we become uncomfortable. Because we’re not disciple guys. We’re family guys!

We think everyone should be married! We start singles groups at churches for those poor souls who aren’t. They deserve happiness too! We tell college students things like, “The right one for you is out there.” How presumptuous, how...blasphemous!

We think people who live in unconventional arrangements, like monks or nuns or intentional community folk or just anyone who doesn't live in a normal nuclear family, we think they're weird and somehow not to be trusted!

We'll do anything for the kids—we want them to have the best house, their own room, a really safe and reliable minivan or SUV, the best teachers, the best schools—we'll leave our neighborhood, where others may need us, just to go to a neighborhood where our kids will have the very best schooling available. And this seems obvious to us! Of course! Do it for the kids! They're our future!

Family is what we live for in America, and, even more indicative, for most of us family is the one thing we would die for. Which is just another way of saying, in America, we worship family. We have our saints (James Dobson) our relics (the suburb, the gated community, the picket fence, the good school), our scriptures (Good Housekeeping, Better Homes and Gardens, and a limitless supply of parenting books), we even have our holy days (Mother's Day, Father's Day).

We're family people! Family, for many of us, determines our social imaginary. It is because of our allegiance to family that some things seem obvious (we must have the safest car at any cost) and others seem absurd (we can't invite them to live with us right now). We're family people! I'm a family guy!

And Jesus says, I'm calling you to be disciples, not family guys. To be a disciple, everything would have to change. We might have to get different (or fewer) clothes, drive a different car, eat different foods, live in a different place, have different friends; we might have to give everything away. Like Jerry, many of those who heard Jesus walked away saying, "No, I'm not ready for it."

Are you ready for it? Have you counted the cost, as Jesus tells his would-be followers to do? What is the cost? The cost is that you must become an individual alone before Jesus (Bonhoeffer). You must decide yes or no for Jesus. It is the most important decision of your life. Your response to father, mother, spouse, son, daughter, friends, career—all of these responses are absolutely and utterly secondary to your response to Christ. Christ wishes to stand between you and these other things—not to prevent you from loving them or caring for them, but to help you love them rightly and well, as creatures created by him and for him. Every attempt to establish a relationship that ignores the presence of Christ is a rejection of him. This is why you must hate those forms of relationship that tempt us to place Christ second. This is what it means to hate father and mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters. It means to place Christ at the center and to see that Christ is the way to everything else. You love your children most when you intercede for them to Christ. You love your spouse most when you intercede for him or her to Christ. We are a community most in common prayer to Christ. He wants to be the mediator between you and God and between you and every other person. He wants you to give him everything: even your family, even your possessions, even your life. Are you ready for it?

If you're like me, you may want to run. The cost may seem too high. The good news is: if you feel you want to run, you're probably encountering the real Jesus. So count the cost. Jesus is still calling disciples.