

***“Taking the Long View”***

Did you hear that? No? I could have sworn I heard lectionary preachers all across the country groan and complain: this is the passage they assign for the first Sunday of the summer! To be sure, this passage contains some of the hardest sayings of Jesus to explain or make sense of: *If they have called the master of the household Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!...Whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven...I have not come to bring peace, but the sword...I have come to set man against father, and daughter against mother ...whoever loves father or mother more than 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.*

There is so much to find troubling in this passage. It is not merely that the content of the sayings are difficult to understand and appropriate, even more unsettling, I think, is the image of Jesus that Matthew is putting forth here. Sure, we know that Jesus was not always kind and gentle. Sometimes he became angry and spoke harshly, mostly to the religious authorities who had lost perspective and deified their doctrines. But Jesus is speaking here to his disciples. Part of what he is saying is that being a disciple will not be easy. And this was probably a crucial message for Matthew’s key audience who were already experiencing some backlash. It is just part of the territory, Jesus seems to be saying. After all, no one who is trying to start a new movement is going to say, “Stick with me until the going gets tough, but if it becomes difficult you have my blessing to bail.” That doesn’t work.

As one commentator points out, “In the volatile religious and cultural situation of the first century, missionaries from Matthew’s church had undoubtedly been

disciplined by religious councils, called on the carpet before public officials, rejected by members of their own families, and hated by many for their mission labors.”<sup>1</sup> And so in a way, even though Jesus’ words have a bit more grit than we are used to, we can see perhaps see that this is an instance of what we can call “tough love.”

Still, even with if we think that, a few of these sayings remain hard to swallow, especially the ones about loving father or mother more than me is not worthy of me and setting one family member against the other. It would be one thing for Jesus to say, “If you follow me your family may reject you.” It is quite another for him to say, as he does here, that “In order to follow me, you have to reject your family.”

At least one biblical scholar I know argues that, even though that meaning seems to be clear to us, Jesus is not merely telling his disciples that they must abandon their loved ones in order to follow him. According to John Dominic Crossan, Jesus is doing something much more subversive: attacking the very fabric of their culture. He writes, “If the supreme value for the twentieth-century American imagination is *individualism*, based on economics and property, [the same] for the first-century Mediterranean imagination can be called, to the contrary, *groupism*, based on kinship and gender.”<sup>2</sup> Crossan asks us to imagine that, “The family is the society in miniature, the place where we first and most deeply learn how to love and be loved, hate and be hated, help and be helped, abuse and be abused.”<sup>3</sup> The point, he tells us then, is not that we have to forsake the ones we love, but that we must be willing to abandon the structures of power in which we currently dwell in favor of God’s more egalitarian vision. We must forsake what we have learned about how to categorize and classify people in favor of recognizing that we are all children of God, all

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), pp. 120-121.

<sup>2</sup> *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994) p 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

on equal footing in God's sight, and in order to recognize that you have to be willing to welcome a stranger or enemy into your household, just as you would a loved one. Or as Paul puts it in Galatians(3:28): "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Perhaps then, this break down of the family is best understood as Jesus giving his followers a preview of the Kingdom of God, not the place, but the way of living with God as the only absolute authority. If this is the case then we can understand Jesus to be extending an invitation to a new, some might say radical, perspective on life. The reason this perspective is so counter-intuitive for us then is precisely because we have been raised by our human parents, and not by our divine One. What if we made the choice to honor God's ways more than the ways that have been passed down to us through our families and culture?

Peter Gomes calls this taking the long view<sup>4</sup>. It is the peculiar perspective of faith that takes into account a much broader outlook than our own. It is about realizing that there is more to life than my own life, that we are connected in ways that are hard to fathom, and that what effects one will in some way or another effect all.

Jamaica Richter had such a realization through a conversation with her daughter at breakfast. She tells the story on NPR's "This I Believe" series<sup>5</sup>: "My daughter Maia is 2 and has just asked about our cat. Our cat is dead. Maia knows this. What she's wondering is where he's gone and what has happened to him...This is the moment I realize I need to know what I believe...My parents were straightforward in admitting they didn't know what happens when we die. As a child, I probably lost a solid year of sleep pondering that enormous mystery. Bone-still under the covers I lay

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), pp.74-78.

<sup>5</sup> Available: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5355301>.

awake picturing my future of eternal nothingness and wracked by the tragedy of no more Me. The subject still haunts me. I'd like Maia's attitude to be slightly healthier. This is what I bring to composing an answer to her question about the cat...After a weighty pause I tell my daughter that Martin (the cat) is out in the field. I tell her that when animals, including people, die, they are usually put into the ground and that their bodies become the grasses, flowers and trees...[I] check her reaction. She appears untroubled. She seems thrilled by the thought of one day becoming a flower. I am stunned. In this exchange, I actually realize what I believe, as if so many fragments from my life -- camping trips and nature walks, pangs of sympathy, awe toward the crashing sea and towering skyscraper, love, science class, motherhood -- have suddenly converged into one unified conviction: not that I'm destined for plant fertilizer, but that there is more to life than my life."

There is more to life than my life. That is taking the long view. All are one in Christ. That is taking the long view. *Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* That is taking the long view. Monk and mystic Thomas Merton writes, "The things we really need come to us only as gifts, and in order to receive them as gifts as we have to be open. In order to be open, we have to renounce ourselves, in a sense we have to die to our image of ourselves, our autonomy, our fixation upon our self-willed identity."

In other words, if all we are concerned about is what is of concern to us, than we are not taking the long view. If we cannot see beyond ourselves, we are not taking the long view. If we cannot let go of our singular perspective then we are not taking the long view. If the only knowledge we are interested in is what we already know, we are not taking the long view. Faith, Jesus tells us, insists on taking the long view. It means trying to see the world as God would have us see it, not as we want to see it.

Perhaps that is why today's passage strikes us as difficult, not because it is tough to understand but because it is tough to hear. We want our view confirmed, not challenged. Maybe that is why Jesus comes across so harsh, because he knows that we are not going to give up our self-willed identities easily. They have to be wrestled from us.

It is not easy or comfortable for us to take the long view. If we did, we would not only look at the world differently, but the world would be a different place. It has been said that if the people of Darfur had lighter skin, the world would have come to their aid much quicker and with much more force. The first time I heard that statement I felt like I was punched in the gut. I don't know if that is true or not, but it's a disturbing thought isn't it? There is probably no way to really prove that statement, but it can be disproved through action.

Likewise, Barbara Brown Taylor points out that there is no way to explain what Jesus means when he says, *those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it*. The paradoxical promise "contains truth that can only be experienced," she writes. "You do not have to die in order to discover the truth of this saying...You only need to lose track of who you are, or who you thought you were supposed to be, so that you end up lying flat on the dirt floor basement of your heart."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is only then, when we have lost enough of ourselves to realize that there is more to life than my life, are we ready to find the life God intends for us all.

Let us pray: *Help us to be those, O God, who are willing to risk it all in order to find life in you; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

---

<sup>6</sup> *Leaving Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), p xi.