

HATING ONE’S RELATIVES FOR CHRIST
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Stanford Memorial Church
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That’s what we clergy modestly call a difficult text! Today’s gospel lessonⁱ has Jesus telling large crowds that were traveling with him: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brother and sisters...cannot be my disciple.” Hate? Hate one’s own family members? Father and mother? Wife? Sons and daughters? Brothers and sisters? One must hate one’s relatives for Christ? One cannot become Jesus’ disciple without hating those whom one loves the most in the world?

I didn’t choose this gospel lesson for this morning. In the Stanford Memorial Church we generally follow the Common Lectionary, which means there are prescribed Bible readings to read and interpret from the pulpit each week on a three year cycle. The Common Lectionary is an attempt to regularize and standardize weekly readings among Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ and many other participating denominations.ⁱⁱ Hence, there are thousands and thousands of clergy standing in pulpits in America and around the world this Sunday trying to make sense of this passage from the gospel of Luke.

So, what do these words of Jesus say about family values? About Christian family values? Or maybe they weren’t the exact words of Jesus, as hundreds of scholars in the group called the Jesus Seminar have claimed about much of the New Testament record, although in this case they agree that Jesus probably said something like this.ⁱⁱⁱ But even if Jesus didn’t say these precise words, the early Christian Church decided to include them in the accepted canon of the New Testament, and there have been two thousand years following that the growing Christian community has worked on understanding and living by them.

This is not an isolated text, either. It’s not an aberration, since similar texts are found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark too, and there are a number of analogous texts in other sections of Luke itself. For example, Jesus says in Matthew: “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.”^{iv} In Mark, the Apostle Peter reminds Jesus that he and the others of the Twelve have left their families behind to follow him. Jesus assures him that “there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children...for my sake...who will not receive a hundredfold in this age...and in the age to come eternal life.”^v Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus says it’s more important to drop everything and follow him immediately than to say farewell to one’s family at home or even later to go home to bury one’s deceased father.^{vi} The strongest words, though – words of hate -- come from our gospel lesson today: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brother and sisters...cannot be my disciple.”

Sounds like some kind of cult, doesn't it? In our Office for Religious Life brochure, we warn Stanford students to "watch out for groups that encourage you to sever ties with close friends and family who are not members. They are manipulative and extremely dangerous."

How does it make sense that Jesus talks about hating one's own relatives for his sake when he is quoted in so many other places in the New Testament on the subject of love -- for one's family, neighbors, friends, and even enemies. He says, "Honor your father and mother; also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself."^{vii} He says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."^{viii} He goes on to preach, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."^{ix} Later the Apostle Paul writes to a Christian community, as often quoted today in wedding ceremonies: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."^x Paul writes to his co-worker, Titus, "Encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children."^{xi} In other letters in the Pauline tradition, it's instructed, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"^{xii} and "Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly."^{xiii} In the First Letter of John, it's explained: "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who...murdered his brother... All who hate a brother or a sister are murderers... Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love... Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars... Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."^{xiv}

Trying to reconcile texts on hating one's relatives for Christ and loving one's relatives for Christ is equally a problem for biblical literalists and for biblical liberals. How can they both be true? Well, maybe they're not. Maybe, we just have to choose which Bible verses we think make the most sense. But I think that's the easy way out. The Christian community has included all of them in the canon, and I think we ought to at least take a shot at seeing whether they can be reconciled before picking and choosing on our own.

So, here goes. First of all, there's no doubt, if we look at the New Testament as a whole, that its central message is one of unconditional love, with Jesus not only as the proclaimer but also the great exemplar. He reaches out to comfort and stand with the marginalized and the oppressed, whether they be prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, the impoverished, prisoners or strangers.^{xv} He's the good shepherd who reaches out to find and save even the weakest and the most lost.^{xvi} As he's hanging on the cross, suffering the most excruciating pain as he's dying, he says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."^{xvii} In the Sermon on the Mount he preaches, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy..."^{xviii} Be reconciled to your brother or sister..."^{xix} "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..."^{xx} "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you..."^{xxi}

Ironically, though, Jesus' message and actions get him in trouble and eventually executed. Many of his disciples also are hounded, banished, tortured, and crucified. Nonviolence, and standing with those discriminated against, and supporting the poor, and challenging the status quo can be very threatening to the powers-that-be and get you hated and killed. Modern Christian ministers like the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. found out the same thing. As he preached the night before he was assassinated, "[W]hen I got into Memphis...some began to say...the threats were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? Well, I don't know what will happen now...But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop... Like anyone I would like to live a long

life...But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will."^{xxii} He was dead the next day. And his Christian commitments and actions during his life caused some division in his own family, especially after their house was bombed when his wife and baby daughter were home.^{xxiii}

Following in Jesus' footsteps, being his disciple, can mean that others will come to hate you, that divisiveness and violence can swirl around you, that your days may be numbered. Following the first great commandment, as Jesus stated it -- loving God with all your heart, soul and mind -- can set you at odds with your friends and with family members. But love for God and discipleship of Jesus the Christ must come before all human relationships, when push comes to shove. This is not to say that one sets out, contrary to everything Jesus stands for, to hate one's relatives or to try to divide families. It means that can be a result of discipleship -- one may well be hated and divided from others even as one tries mightily to love and to unite.

Several scholarly commentaries I have read on our gospel lesson today note that the Greek word in the biblical text that is translated in English as "hate" actually means "love less."^{xxiv} In effect, "Whoever comes to me and does not love relatives less than me, if it comes to that, cannot be my disciple." In fact, this gospel lesson is primarily about the demands of discipleship. Jesus tells two parables: about not building a tower if you haven't first estimated the cost and seeing if you have enough to complete it and about not waging war against someone with twenty thousand troops if you have only ten thousand. Jesus wants people to weigh the costs of becoming his disciples before they too easily follow him. He doesn't want "to lure the unsuspecting into unconsidered commitments," so he "warns the crowd in advance that the way of discipleship will not be easy."^{xxv}

Nonetheless, the New Testament as a whole seems to me to have Jesus calling us to discipleship, asking for primary loyalty, but also dealing tenderly with our inevitable failures to do so. For he proclaims, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."^{xxvi} To the adulterous woman, after the crowd that wanted to stone her has dissipated, Jesus says gently, "Has no one condemned you?... Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."^{xxvii} In the chapter after Jesus is reported in Matthew to have said that his coming will set relatives against each other, he invites "all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens," to "come to me...and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."^{xxviii}

He asks us to realize there's a high bar for complete discipleship -- prioritizing him over family when a choice must be made, being willing to take up one's cross and sacrifice one's life for the cause, giving up one's material possessions -- but he also seems to know that none of us can be sure in advance if we can fulfill all the requirements and that we can't make any guarantees of total fidelity. Otherwise, no one would qualify to be a disciple -- certainly not the twelve apostles that he got in his day.^{xxix} And he surely isn't asking us affirmatively to set ourselves against our relatives or hate them in a hostile or angry way. For this is the man who "blessed little children...and gave his own mother at his death into the care of a loved disciple."^{xxx}

Finally, perhaps the Psalmist had it right when he wrote "O Lord, you have searched me and known me... You discern my thoughts from far away... You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand on me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it."^{xxxi} Amen.

BENEDICTION

The courage of the early morning's dawning,
And the strength of the eternal hills throughout the day,
And the peace of the evening's ending,
And the love of God and neighbor, be in our hearts,
Now and forever. Amen. [Anonymous]

NOTES

ⁱ Luke 14: 25-33.

ⁱⁱ Eugene L. Brand, "Foreword" to Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), pp. ix-xi.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 34, 36, 353.

^{iv} Matthew 10: 34-36.

^v Mark 10:28-30. (See also Luke 18:28-30).

^{vi} Luke 9: 59-62.

^{vii} Matthew 19:19.

^{viii} John 15:13.

^{ix} Matthew 5:44 (See also Luke 6:27; 6:35)

^x I Corinthians 13: 1

^{xi} Titus 2:4.

^{xii} Ephesians 5:25.

^{xiii} Colossians 3:19

^{xiv} I John 3:11-12,15; 4:8,20-21.

^{xv} Matthew 21:31; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 19:1-10; Matthew 25: 31-40.

^{xvi} John 10:11-16.

^{xvii} Luke 23:34.

^{xviii} Matthew 5:7.

^{xix} Matthew 5:24.

^{xx} Matthew 5:39.

^{xxi} Matthew 7:12.

^{xxii} Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," in James Melvin Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 286.

^{xxiii} Coretta Scott King, "Interview," Academy of Achievement,

<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/kin1int-3>

^{xxiv} *Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 946; *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968); *Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1952), Vol. VIII, p. 259; *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 292.

^{xxv} *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 292.

^{xxvi} Luke 6:37.

^{xxvii} John 8:10-11.

^{xxviii} Matthew 11:28-30.

^{xxix} *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 293.

^{xxx} *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, p. 259.

^{xxxi} Psalm 139: 1-6.