

“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.”

Luke 14:26 (NRSVUE)

Trust and Obey

When I get ready to write my weekly column, the first thing I do is check the lectionary for this coming Sunday and the preceding Sunday, to see if there’s a note that interests me, either because it addresses a current issue or it’s just been an intriguing verse to me. Luke 14:26 always rings out, evoking a “What?!” from this reader and, I suspect, many others.

The North American evangelical church has been clear about what they consider as God’s intention for all people—to be in a loving, life-long marriage to one unmarried person of the opposite sex, but the same faith tradition.

But the Bible mentions alternatives to this family structure. Jesus and the apostle Paul were not married, though Peter had a mother-in-law, so he must have been married (which is funny, since Peter is considered the first “pope”—and of course we think popes are supposed to be celibate!). The prophet Hosea was married to a woman considered to be a prostitute, and the mother of the judge Jephthah was a prostitute. Of course, there’s the polygamy, not necessarily recommended but it is certainly clear that several key Old Testament leaders had multiple wives and concubines.

And if all marriages and family relations are to be loving, what are we to make of this passage? Does Jesus really expect all his followers to *hate* their parents and family members? One would like to think that there’s nuance to this passage that we’re missing.

If we look at the Greek word for the verb “hate,” *miseō*, the word is clearly associated with the verbs to hate or detest, but there’s also a comparative aspect to it—so some translators might say “love less than” rather than “hate.” Or, like those who do not believe in a literal vow of poverty, we are not to treat family with hatred, but we should not cling to our family members—and, contrary to our healthy ministry advice of today, we are to put the ministry before family.

So, more likely, we do not take these words literally but as a challenge from Jesus, demanding total commitment. Remember, Jesus also tells potential disciples to hate life itself as well, and to be willing to bear the cross and give up all our possessions to follow Jesus.

What are we willing to let go of for the sake of Christ’s ministry?

As I consider this, I don’t know if I’m trying to find a way out of this almost mortal challenge, but it does occur to me that there are different questions Jesus is presenting. Is Jesus asking for sacrifice? But God says that God doesn’t want sacrifice. Is Jesus sifting out those who are risk averse, or calling for the risk-taking entrepreneurs among us? If so, many established churches have missed the mark! Perhaps the ultimate question is trust. How much do we trust God to provide for us if we give up everything? How much do we trust God to care for our family if we let go of trying to be their sole caregiver? And how much do we trust that even if we lose this mortal life in service to the Gospel, there is an eternal life of rest and reconciliation with God and the saints who have gone before us?

This question of trust was key for me as I prepared to go to seminary. When I started seminary, I spoke to my seminary cohort of what I let go of to start seminary—my future in Silicon Valley, my (imagined) sense of control over my life, and my image as a tough business person—and my professor prayed that I not have to lose any of it. What happened ended up being much more fulfilling than I could have ever hoped for.

A missionary was asked how she could be willing to go to some risky locations, and she said “All the time getting prepared to start the work feels like sacrifice; once you start the work, it’s all grace.” You just have to say yes.

I’m still not sure about Jesus’ rhetoric in demanding that we hate our families in order to join his mission. But I have learned that God is way more than trustworthy! I was hoping that I could trust God not to let me suffer in the ministry. Instead—at least for me—God gave me so much more than I could have imagined. All I had to say is yes. May it be so for you, as well.

Blessings,

Wendy