



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. LINZI STAHLECKER, CURATE
THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 18C, SEPTEMBER 4, 2022
JEREMIAH 1-11; PSALM 139:1-5,12-17; PHILEMON 1-21; LUKE 14:25-33

LEARNING FROM TEENAGERS

Luke 14:25-33 [*Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."*]

Theologian and Roman Catholic priest Nguyen Dhin Anh Nhue wrote in a recent-ish paper what many of us here might be thinking this morning, that Luke 14 verse 26 might just be one of the most demanding, challenging and difficult to understand of Jesus' teachings.¹ "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." Nguyen Dhin Anh Nhue also

highlights the fact that scholars have largely given this verse a wide berth, generally neglecting it in their commentaries, showing little in the way of academic interest.² It's that tricky.

Tricky, for sure, and something of a paradox; after all, back in chapter 6 of Luke's Gospel, Jesus commands us to love even our enemies, and to do good especially to those who hate us.³

¹ Ngyuen Dhin Anh Nhue, *What Could Jesus Mean in Recommending His Disciples Hate Their Parents (Luke 14:26)*, Colloquium 47(2), 2015, 292.

² Ibid., 294.

³ Paraphrased from Luke 6:27

Love is at the heart of Jesus' teaching, so why now, at this point in Luke's Gospel, or ever, would we be called to hate? ... and to hate those seemingly closest to us?

Honoring Father and Mother, as you may be familiar, is one of the 10 commandments, God's commandments. Important stuff. The backbone of Biblical law.

The very first commandment asserts that the people shall have no other gods before the one God, the second forbids idolatry, the third prohibits the misuse of the name of God, and the fourth requires the Sabbath day be kept holy, be kept as a day of rest. For the remaining commandments there's a shift from a focus on God to life in community ... and the very next commandment here is the mandate to honor father and mother. We know Jesus doesn't intend for us to ignore this or any of the commandments. In chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells us "Do not think I have come to abolish the law ... I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."⁴

There is focus then on the family for some other reason.

The so-called nuclear family, parents sharing a household with their children, is believed to be the oldest of the various possible forms of human family configurations.⁵ This can

sometimes expand to include grandparents, married children and their children, to become an extended family. The family unit, potentially at least, offers each of its members vital safety and security, particularly in the form of housing, food, and care when sick, in the form of love. The family also has the potential to offer a degree of economic stability and resource, and it supports and provides for those unable to work.

Families are, and have been in this culture, important for human survival and flourishing.

In Roman society, in the time when Luke's gospel was written, the role and the power held by the head of each household, the oldest living male of the family, the *pater familias*, was an essential part of the *legal* fabric of society. And this form of legalistic, household system was something of a prototype for institutions and systems that would emerge in western culture in the centuries that followed.

The family unit, and its relatives: the institutions it gave rise to are, and have been throughout the history of this dominant culture, important for human survival. But it can certainly be argued that they are not always instrumental for human flourishing. Perhaps this is because, all too often, families, just like individuals, turn away from God ... turn away from those first four commandments ... forget

⁴ Matthew 5:17

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship>

that God is the reason we *are*, forget that relationship with God is the meaning and purpose of *all life*.

As a parent of three teenage children who share our home, and during these last two weeks of vacation-time have shared pretty much every waking moment, it's hard not to smirk when I hear Jesus' words, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother ... brothers and sisters ... cannot be my disciples" ... with those criteria, there are certainly moments in the Stahlecker household when my kids are prime candidates for faithful discipleship!

And I'm not entirely kidding. Watching my kids, noticing what they're going through, the way they respond to me and to Troy, and to the world they've been born into ... I think they might have something important to teach me; their responses to life have given me a perspective, a way of dimly perceiving a truth in this most difficult of teachings from Jesus.

I was also a teenager once, a long time ago now, and yet I'm noticing my own experience was not entirely different from that of my kids. There are many things that make being a teenager very hard indeed (and there are many things I most certainly do not like about it and will not miss when this phase of life passes) ...

and, there is also an openness, a kind of flexibility, a *suppleness* of the teenage mind, a receptivity to possibility, and also what feels like an *in-built* instinct to push back against established parental or institutional wisdom, to question and to challenge almost everything, and then to resist or even reject the lot! The teenage experience I remember, *and* the one I'm witnessing with my kids today, is full of critique of the ways that things are, and there's real energy for pointing out how much better things *could* be if they were in charge.

Combined with this, is the inescapable reality of *really* feeling things, there's genuine passion behind teenage beliefs, teenage commitments, and teenage love.

This heady and often volatile cocktail of resistance, possibility, and passion is all stirred up and held together with what I think is an indomitable courage. This is a time of life that places enormous demands on every young person. This is a time of life during which it's impossible to hide from the demands of the ever-present question "who am I?"⁶

Now, in the best-case scenario, love flows between teenagers and their family members, and *still*, ideas about how to live, or new beliefs firmly held, these can *still* create tricky,

⁶ <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/adolescent-health/adolescent-development>

competing loyalties. Do I follow what I believe to be right, or do I set that aside and assume the wants or expectations of my parents, my family, to keep the peace, to preserve the status quo. And that's the best-case dilemma. If someone is entirely dependent on their family, *needs it* for economic support, a place to live, a way to eat, maintaining loyalty to the family can be a matter of survival. Breaking away from the wants and expectations of the family unit, the family system, in this kind of scenario, can be fraught with risk, and would be a genuine, and possibly dangerous, leap of faith.

We are commanded to have no other gods than the One God, we are commanded not to bow down to or worship any idol: not family, not institution, not cultural norm, not employer, not anything we humans have made for ourselves, and that includes our systems of stability, and predictability, and even safety. The love above all love, *that* loyalty, is reserved for God alone. In our understandable fear we hesitate. When we give our loyalty unquestioningly to a human-made institution or system, even a family, we can lose our way, setting aside the demands of our discipleship, setting aside those first four commandments, and aligning ourselves instead with the status quo.

If there ever were a group who might viscerally and instinctively understand why it might be necessary to hate all that is closest and dearest in order to follow Jesus, why that is *necessary*, it is perhaps teenagers; and they might have

something to teach us in that. And if there ever were a group who might actually have the courage to do whatever it takes to pursue their truth, it is perhaps teenagers. A time of life when possibility is larger than fear.

It's this kind of commitment, this passionate commitment, this gloriously idealistic and infuriatingly stubborn teenager-esque commitment *to discipleship*, that Jesus calls us into. It might be perceived as reckless, might be dangerous even, as it insists on love and liberation at all costs. This kind of unshakeable, unwavering, laser focused commitment to coming into fullness of relationship with God, to live outwardly and intentionally with God as reason and as purpose of life ... this takes great courage, and ... will inevitably call for great sacrifice. Jesus asks us to understand that cost, to know that cost is very real and very necessary in this world built and maintained by human hands. And time and again, Jesus teaches us that *together*, as Church, we can do this very hard thing. And that together, as Church, we will ultimately create, and recreate, family; family, transformed, as it is called into being in discipleship, following Jesus, and transformed, as a part of God's Kingdom reality.