

“Letting Go of Fear”

Pastor Mary Robinson-Mohr

Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39

Sunday June 22nd, 2008

Well, we have two passages of Scripture before us this morning that are just plain difficult. First, we hear of Hagar and her young son Ishmael being kicked out of the family compound of Abraham to wander alone in a hostile wilderness. Then we hear Jesus say, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Then Jesus states that the closest family ties will be severed by this unpeaceful sword that he brings.

What is all this, anyway? Isn't our faith one that brings peace and unity? Isn't “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild” the one who knits us all together as no one else throughout human history has been able to do? How can Jesus say that “one's foes will be members of one's own household”?

Normally, family ties are very important to us. Have you ever been in a class or study group that discussed the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”? It seems pretty obvious that killing another human being is wrong. But then comes the condition, “Unless, of course, my family were threatened, then I would kill someone to defend them.” There is usually widespread agreement on that.

This is the power of a family and of those that we love. As people of faith, we are pretty peaceable. We refuse to spill blood...unless those we love are in harm's way. Then we are ready to kill to protect our loved ones. What we love determines how we act and what we do. And family is one of those loves that tops the list of forming our behavior.

Then Jesus comes along and says he has come to sever those deep family ties and turn upside down all kinds of households. What has happened here?

Now keep in mind that Matthew is the same gospel where we hear Jesus preach in the Sermon on the Mount about how to react when someone has wronged us, how we must turn the other cheek. He has given firm guidelines about unity in marriage, about forgiveness, about loving one's enemy. Then later on in this same gospel, we hear Jesus instructing his followers about what to do in times of disagreement and of endless forgiveness and strict unity in marriage.

So did Matthew hear this part wrong? Did he misunderstand something that Jesus said? This seems to be 180 degrees away from everything else Jesus says and stands for.

This is one of those places where a student of the Bible and a disciple of Jesus must do his or her homework, and look at the entire witness of the Scriptures together. Some people have taken today's Gospel message, and they have been misguided to think they have permission to neglect their own dependants and spend all their time on "the Lord's work," however they choose to define that. Well, Jesus never says here that everybody who follows him will find themselves split off from their families. He is clear in all of his other teachings that following him does not automatically get you kicked out of your family, and his other teachings have a lot to say about caring for one another and for one's family.

What is clear is that sometimes Jesus brings great peace and unity. Sometimes Jesus brings a sword. Sometimes Jesus draws people together, but sometimes he divides and disrupts.

You know, we North American Christians have had it pretty soft compared to so many of our sisters and brothers around the world. Somehow, we've lulled ourselves into thinking that we have found a way to follow Jesus without getting hurt. And somehow, we've convinced ourselves that being a Christian means the same thing as being a compassionate and caring American. And after all, we say, Jesus is the one who keeps families together, who brings the ultimate "family values," who confirms everything that we think is right and just and valuable.

So it is very unsettling to have Jesus rattle us out of our contentment with today's lesson and say, "No, you don't get to set the agenda for the definition of values, morality, and idealism. I do. You don't get to decide what fits nicely into your needs and your world and then have me come along and give it a rubber stamp of approval. You are following me, and that means I may take you places where you need to let go of all your comfortable props and systems and enablements."

A church consultant was hired to try to bring some resolution to a very divided congregation once. They anticipated his report would urge peace and unity. So they were shocked when the report included this: "I've never seen a church grow without conflict. Has anybody here ever learned anything or grown significantly without conflict? Sometimes Jesus has to end one congregation in order to give birth to a new one."

And whereas families can bring the greatest blessings and the deepest love, they can also become so inwardly focused that they become a bit like "The Sopranos." No, I'm not talking about a section of our choir. I'm talking about that TV show about a mafia family, where people commit atrocious acts out of loyalty to "The Family." In a culture that presently has a rather settled and accommodated church, is it possible for us to faithfully follow a God who may ask us to step out of our comfort zone, who may ask us to put our accumulated comfort aside, and who may ask us to create havoc in the name of bringing true justice and true peace to our world?

God's claim for faithfulness and loyalty may clash with a family's claim for faithfulness and loyalty. God's claim upon us may put us at odds with all that we love and value, be it family, or creature comforts, or the predictable status quo. We are known by those things that we love, and loving Jesus may bring a rearrangement of loves to our lives.

This disturbing message from Jesus today does not give us an unquestioned reinforcement of family unity. It does not suggest that the sticking together of families automatically reflects faithfulness, nor does it mean that by family solidarity all of the injustices of the world will be solved. Instead, Jesus questions a blind idolatry of the family and warns that becoming his disciple may very well divide rather than unite the home and one's closest relationships.

In the end, it comes down to letting go of fear in order to follow Jesus faithfully. Those things that are known, those things that seem dependable, those things that are so very valuable, may be those very things that you are most afraid of losing. It is that fear that is holding you back from moving ahead to do what God urges you to do, and it is that fear that needs to be turned into trust in God, and this is not done without much turmoil.

I know a family that went through a horrible time some years ago. The father, a true gentleman, had been a career military officer, an Air Force colonel. The military was his world. Then during the saga of the Viet Nam War, his son felt he could not serve in the military, and he fled to Canada to avoid the draft. Regardless of your own feelings about that period in US history, this family was torn to pieces. The shame felt by the parents was palpable to their friends. The absence of the son was like an unhealed wound to those around them. Then, years later, the son returned to the US. He and his parents talked and talked. It was so hard, but they began to listen to one another in a new light.

I was having lunch with this couple years after all of this, and at one point in the conversation, they mentioned their children. When they spoke of this son, they said very simply but profoundly, "You know, he went to Canada during the Viet Nam War, and we were stunned. But after it was all over, we found out he was right and we were wrong. By the way, he and his wife are coming up next week,..." and then they went on to speak of this son's children, and of how proud they were of everything he had done.

Division that had seemed irrational at the time, and a rift that led one son to stand, probably shaking, with love and yet deep conviction over a matter. Parents that could not support this conviction, or share his direction, yet sought years later to come to a point of understanding. All of these folks had to let go of fear, and trust God to walk with them through an unthinkable time in order to reach a point of unconditional love that says, "I don't always understand you, but I don't have to understand you to love you."

May God lead us in paths of faithfulness and love. May God lead us to a place of trust so that we can let go of our fears of loss and put our love of God above everything else. Everything. Amen.