

“Releasing Attachments”

Luke 14.25–33

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 5 Sep 2004

This is not an easy text, but it's an important one. The version we find in Luke's gospel is also found in the Gospel of Thomas, and a softened version is found in the Gospel According to Matthew.¹ Luke and Thomas seem to make releasing attachments to family and wealth a *precondition* for discipleship.

It's also another of those texts that isn't cited terribly often by the people in Colorado Springs at Focus on the Family, because Jesus cuts at the heart of so-called “family values.” It's a deeply countercultural text. All of us were taught to honor our parents, to value and treat our siblings with kindness, and to put our children first – above ourselves and anything else. That's the “tape” that runs in our heads; it's the accepted cultural norm in our society. And it was even more firmly entrenched in the society of those who heard Jesus speak these words 2,000 years ago. We are far less dependent on the family unit than our ancestors were. You and I might not think twice about moving to another part of the country or even the world, separating ourselves from our parents and siblings. (Mike Byrne is with us this morning, having returned for the weekend from his foreign service training, and Mike will be working for the U.S. State Department in Frankfurt. Cathy and Anne will join him a year from now.) We're willing and able to move around, and to leave our extended families behind. But, most of us are still deeply connected to our nuclear families.

Listen to how the Jesus Seminar frames it: “The severity of [Jesus'] saying can only be understood in the context of the *primacy* of filial relationships. Individuals had no real existence apart from their ties to blood relatives, especially parents. If one did not belong to a family, one had no real social existence. Jesus is therefore confronting the social structures that governed his society at their core. For Jesus, family ties faded into insignificance in relation to [the kingdom of God], which he regarded as the fundamental claim on human loyalty.”²

So, what do you make of hating parents, children, spouses, siblings, and even hating life itself?

Does Jesus intend to say that we all should get rid of our kids? (We all have those days...but...) The Shakers thought so. They lived simple, celibate lives, without a lot of attachments to the material world. But, if you've ever visited a Shaker community in New England or the Midwest, you know that those communities are museums: the Shakers died out.

This summer, Dominic Crossan told a story about becoming a monk in the Servite order. As a novice entering the priory (which was actually an opulent estate outside Dublin), Dom was told to say good-bye to his family and that he could under no circumstances see them for a year. If one of his parents died or a sibling was married, he would not be allowed to leave the priory to attend. He was forced to let go of his attachments to his family of origin. And as a Roman Catholic clergyman, he didn't have to worry much about attachments to spouse or children. That may seem harsh, but it's one way – albeit a rather dramatic way – to look at relinquishing attachment to family.

¹ Mt. 10.37 ff.

² Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels*. (NY: Macmillan, 1993), p. 353.

Still, I like my family. In fact, I really love them a lot. In fact, I'm quite attached to them. So, what does Jesus have to say to me here?

Frankly, it makes things kind of messy to be a clergyperson and to have a family. You all rely on me for a lot: for counseling, for spiritual guidance, for strategic leadership, to be on call for emergencies 24 hours a day, as well as for designing and leading worship (which often happens on a weekend: prime family time). It's difficult to balance the needs of my congregation with the substantial needs of my two sons and wife, which is something that Catholic priests don't have to worry about. And, that messiness causes me to struggle in that balancing act. Yet, the struggle and balancing helps me to be a better minister; it makes me constantly aware of the various obligations I have.

Do you think that Jesus was saying that having commitments to spouses, children, parents, and siblings is inherently a bad or evil thing, and therefore it should be avoided? I hardly think so. Then what do you think Jesus is pointing us toward?



In the Christian tradition, as in most of the world's great religions, there is a dialogue between asceticism and the goodness of creation. I say a dialogue, because I don't think that those two are always antithetical. And the dialogue is important. In today's text, we have Jesus telling us to eschew familial entanglements and possessions and to evaluate carefully the cost of discipleship. And being a follower of Jesus does have real, tangible costs.

Yet, Jesus distinguishes himself from his mentor, John the Baptizer, who isolated himself in the wilderness and subsisted on locusts and wild honey. Rather, Jesus is accused by his challengers as being a glutton and a drunkard,³ which certainly doesn't paint the picture of an ascetic.

When Jesus tells us to hate our family members, do you think that's what he literally wants all of his disciples to do, or do you think there is a metaphor locked within this attention-getting statement? Does Jesus want us to kiss all of our possessions good-bye?

In the different stories of Jesus in the New Testament, he asks different things of different people. From the rich young ruler, he asks that the man give **everything** to the poor, and when the youthful aristocrat cannot comply, he wanders away dejected.⁴

When Zaccheus, the corrupt tax collector, repays those he has defrauded and gives **half** his wealth to the poor, Jesus declares that Zaccheus has seen salvation.⁵ Why did he cut Zaccheus a better deal than the rich young ruler? Perhaps it was because the young ruler's sense of attachment to his wealth was so much greater.

Deliberate poverty is a hallmark of mendicant orders (such as the Franciscans) in Roman Catholicism and also among many Buddhist monastics, who carry begging bowls to receive offerings of food and money. (Just a reminder: UCC clergy do not take vows of obedience, chastity, **or poverty!**)

Does Jesus mean to imply that money, power, and influence are bad? Is that why Jesus asks us to let go of our possessions? In First Timothy⁶, the author says "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." But, how many of us have heard it this way: "**Money** is the root of all evil?" The **love** of money – avarice – is the root of all kinds of evil. Money is not "filthy lucre" or something to be avoided; it's a tool that can be used for good or for ill.

Just as I struggle with balancing family and ministry, each of us must struggle with our material wealth and influence and how we are going to use it to help bring in the

³ Mt. 11.19 & Lk. 7.29

⁴ Mt 19.16

⁵ Lk 19.1

⁶ 1 Tim 6.10

kingdom of God. And it's *messy!* It can be hard to decide whether you're going to give \$250 to the Neighbors in Need offering or go skiing for a weekend. (My personal struggle is that I really, really, really want a hot tub. But, I'm trying not to let that stand in the way of more important things, like tithing.)

It's *attachment* to things and wealth that gets us into trouble, not the things themselves. When we have issues with our own sense of needing to control, when we grasp and cling to things, when we allow them to control us, then they become negative and harmful. And when we can live with possessions and not be ruled by them, then we will be free. Perhaps the reason that Jesus talks about our attachment to possessions is that it's so easy to fall into the pattern of clinging to material wealth. I struggle with this as much as most of you do. I'm on the journey *with* you, not ahead of you. Releasing our attachments is not a neat little package; *it's messy.*

Listen to this poem from Rilke, a Catholic, called "Buddha in Glory:"

Center of all center, core of cores,
almond self-enclosed and growing sweet—
all this universe, to the furthest stars
and beyond them, is your flesh, your fruit.

Now you feel how nothing clings to you;
your vast shell reaches into endless space,
and there the rich, thick fluids rise and flow.
Illuminated in your infinite peace,

a billion stars go spinning though the night,
blazing high above your head.
But in you is the presence that
will be, when all the stars are dead.

What would it feel like to have "nothing cling to you" and to be "illuminated in infinite peace?" At the moment when each of us looks death in the eye, we will let go of all our worldly attachments. For some it will look like sacrifice. And for others it will seem like freedom and release. Why not start early and let go of some of the attachments that cause suffering?



This difficult text, with its demanding sayings from Jesus, is *not* about moral superiority. It's *not* about the false virtue of looking poor so that people don't suspect you have wealth. It's *not* about being thrifty or living an impoverished life.

My hunch about Plymouth is that our ethos has been "we can't afford that," whether "that" happens to be decent furniture or a paved parking lot or increased mission giving. This is not a poor congregation, but I think at times we've acted collectively from a sense of scarcity, rather than abundance. And when we act out of fear, from a sense of scarcity, we are acting also from our attachment to our possessions.



Our families and our material wealth are among the greatest assets we have at our disposal as a congregation. They are gifts from God for the people of God. When we together learn to release our attachments, and when we learn to trust in the goodness of God that is shot-through the universe, we will sense deep liberation and true freedom. And

the world will be a better place for it: a place that looks a bit more like the kingdom of God.

I'll end with a brief poem, called "Eternity," from the English mystic poet, William Blake:

He who binds himself to a joy
Does the wingéd life destroy.
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

May it be so. Amen.