

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Matthew 10:34-39

SERMON TITLE: Love Me More

So I wonder: How many of us would vote for a politician that said the kinds of things about families that Jesus said about families in this morning's text? Jesus said some shocking things, don't you think? I thought that the followers of Jesus were supposed to be pro-family. I thought that Jesus was all for protecting families and keeping them safe. I thought that Jesus was all about peace in families—and keeping families together. But here in this story, Jesus turns things upside down in a shocking sort of way!

And this stuff is in the Bible! In fact, after I read these five verses, I said, *This is the word of the Lord*; and you replied, *Thanks be to God!* Did we mean it or were our fingers crossed? So what's going on here?

Well, it seems to me that Jesus is wielding the sword this morning! He's cutting through our skewed perceptions and getting to the heart of the matter. He's pointing to the deepest love relationships in our lives--the relationships within our families--and he's saying, *Love me more. Love me more than ones you love the most. If family relationships stand in the way of following me, then love me more. Even if family members become your enemies, love me more. If you don't, you're not worthy of me.*

And the unsettling truth is that throughout the history of the church, Jesus has wielded the sword of division that has split families apart and put families at risk. The scriptures illustrate the point. When Jesus called two brothers, James and John, to follow him, they were mending nets in their fishing boat with their father Zebedee. The last line of the story simply says, *Immediately they left the boat **and their father**, and followed him.* (The New Oxford Annotated Bible. Matt. 4:22. New Revised Standard Version. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.) Jesus was calling--and no matter how much James and John loved their father or valued their family obligations, the call of Jesus

took precedence.

In the early centuries of the church's life, conflict occurred within families when a family member decided to follow Christ. For many Jewish families, Jesus was a blasphemer--a false prophet--a Messianic pretender--an enemy of God. And who would want a beloved family member to follow the teachings of a blasphemer? For many Gentile families, Christians as well as Jews were considered atheists because they believed in one God and not all the gods. And who would want a beloved family member to be branded an atheist?

Even more than this, following Jesus Christ was a dangerous business. Christianity had powerful opponents. And who would want to see a beloved family member thrown into prison, or nailed to a Roman cross--all for the sake of an executed Jewish prophet from Nazareth?

And Christian families were at risk. Whole families--mothers, fathers, sons and daughters--were put to death by the Romans for following Jesus Christ.

This was the cost of following Jesus back in those days. He wielded a sword that split families apart and put families at risk. And it still happens today, especially when family members seek to follow Christ in ways that are dangerous and counter-cultural.

Some of you may remember the names of Heather Mercer and Dana Curry. They were two young women who went to Afghanistan in 2001 as Christian aid workers during the rule of the Taliban. They were arrested for allegedly sharing their faith with an Afghan family in the family's home. They were held as prisoners for 128 days until they were finally set free by anti-Taliban forces.

In an interview with Heather's mother, it was clear that she had been totally opposed to her daughter's decision to do aid work in Afghanistan. Another family member even wrote to the U. S. State Department trying to find a legal means to block Heather and Dana from

answering this call from Christ. ("Afghan Prison Ordeal Ends Happily for U. S. Aid Workers." Special Edition, CNN. 30 June 2008 <<http://cnn.specials>>.)

Heather wrote of these divisions within in her family: *We answered hard questions posed by our families and friends. Extraordinary are the parents who don't balk at the idea of their child moving to a third-world, war-ravaged, drought-stricken country—and, in this case, a country serving as a hub for international terrorist activity. That we had decided to go as Christian aid workers to a country where a harsh, unpredictable regime severely curtailed religious freedom gave most of our loved ones pause at best, and otherwise prompted serious alarm. We were asked, "Aren't you being foolish? Why would you jeopardize your own safety?"* (Curry, Dayna, Heather Mercer, and Stacy Mattingly. Prisoners of Hope. New York: Doubleday, 2002.)

When I was in seminary in Washington, D. C., there was a group of Christians—families included—who had intentionally chosen to live in the inner city so that they could minister to the least, the last and the lost in name of Jesus. Where they chose to live set them apart as a counter-cultural community. They also shared their goods in common and sought to practice the non-violent ethic of Jesus. They raised their children on streets where prostitutes solicited their customers from the curbsides, where drug pushers sold their poison, where gun shots could be heard on a regular basis.

One of the women living in this Christian community was related a family I had known all my life. Her name was Mary. And when Laura Jean and I would go back home for the holidays I would often talk with Mary's uncle about the family's reaction to Mary's risky discipleship. He shared with me how concerned the family was with Mary's well being and, of course, the family had strongly opposed her pursuing this dangerous course. After Mary joined the community, some in the family thought that she had turned her back on them. They were devastated.

So what does all of this have to do with us? Well, some difficult questions are raised for us. Do we really love Jesus as much as we say we do? Do we love him more than the ones we love the most? How far are we willing to go to put our lives on the line for him even if our families are also put at risk?

To be honest with you, I've done my best to blunt the edges of the sword. I've tried to turn it into a butter knife that threatens very little in my life and that's only good for cutting through the easy stuff. As I have told you before, in so many ways I've said no to the dangerous and counter-cultural way of Christ, primarily because of my family. I just don't want to put myself and the people I love at risk for the sake of following Jesus all the way to the cross.

And this grieves me. It grieves as a father because there was time when I dreamed of teaching our two boys through my own example, how to find life by putting everything at risk to follow Christ. I didn't want our boys to be shocked by a text like this. I wanted them to understand it and to live it. But I haven't been a very good teacher. My own resistance has gotten in the way. I've repeatedly put our family before Christ. So if our boys have learned anything from me about following Jesus, it's only how to scratch the surface of Christian discipleship.

And I'm grieved as a pastor because it seems to me that somehow or another, God intends for the church to produce followers of Jesus Christ who will love him more than anyone or anything else in life--who will pay the full price of discipleship and put everything at risk for his sake, including their families and even life itself. And until we become a church like this, I fear that we too are only scratching the surface of Christian discipleship.

And so I ask you: What would it take for us to love Jesus Christ more than anyone or anything else in life? And how would our church change if at least some of us actually began to

live like this?