

June 22, 2008

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For the people of St. Philip's

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Sometimes the Bible doesn't seem too relevant in our modern lives. Often when I read the upcoming Gospel reading for the first time, I find myself going, "huh?" I ponder it most of the week, coming to it with more questions than brilliant illuminations. That's because at first glance there are a whole lot of passages that just don't make sense, it takes some effort to go deeper. Opponents of Christianity love to point to places where the Bible contradicts itself. In this passage there's a wide open opportunity for debate. Jesus says, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the world. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." That seems to go against and contradict a lot of what Jesus tells us. Isn't this the fellow who told us that "blessed are the peacemakers," -- who told us to "turn the other cheek," --and who when arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane says to Peter, "Put away your sword, those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Huh ???

As with many passages in our Scripture, if we seek a literal translation of this passage, we might be missing the deeper nuance. Our culture does not have a nuanced understanding of a sword. This passage, although disturbing, is not merely a Christian call to arms. Christ brings us the image of a sword to cut through our lives with his radical love and calling to follow him. He brings a sword of truth. A sword used to cut through our lives in order for us to move toward a new way of living. Christ's sword cuts our lives open, it completely interrupts what we hold near and dear to our hearts and that sword destroys our present reality. It's supposed to hurt!

When Christ cuts through our pleasant distractions, things change. Jesus echoes the prophet Micah here when he says, "I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man's enemies will be the members of his own household." He is coming to turn our whole world upside down.

I've been thinking a bit about what my calling into the ministry has done for my parents. Both have been here recently for a visit. We now all live 18 hours drive away from each other. I spent the first forty years of my life in close proximity to my parents. I love them and our extended family very much. I never dreamed when Rick and I packed up our belongings six years ago and headed to Sewanee for seminary that we would not return to a life lived in Kansas. I never dreamed that my husband would not live to continue the journey with me. I never dreamed that I would be the one to become a priest in the Episcopal Church! I am here to tell you that I have cried every step of the way. It continues to hurt, to follow God's call. I often feel as though my side has been pierced by a sword. Yet I can not imagine going any other way than through it. Jesus' call pulls me through it all.

I am sure that my mother and father had dreams for my life. They had hopes and aspirations for what I would do when I grew up and who I would become. I'm fairly certain that they did not dream that I would become an Episcopal priest. We were Methodists, after all. And pretty darn quiet about it, I might add. I was not a Jesus freak when I was growing up. My parents are proud of me and understand that I am doing something I must do, but I suspect that when I told them I was going into this ministry, a piece of their dream must have died. It meant that I could no longer be a daughter who was living nearby through their times of joy and sadness. It means that my children will not grow up near them. It makes us all sad.

"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me..." Those words of Christ are hard to swallow-- but if I followed the dreams of my parents I don't think I would have ended up here. In our culture few children live out their lives near to their parents. It's almost expected that a child will go farther than their parents. But In the time of Jesus many, if not all, children were forced to live out the lives that their parents had before them. Tradition was valued above all else. This cultural truth makes Jesus' call to a different place all the more radical.

Jesus tells us that when he cuts into your life- people will be hurt, family traditions will be crushed, and it will happen in the hardest way. It will happen with the people who love us most and who can't believe you are going a different way. The people who will put up the biggest fight against you as you are following your calling are those who are closest to you. That's because everything will change...and it's going to hurt.

This passage comes during Jesus' pep talk to his disciples. He is describing the type of people that he wants for his ministry in this world. He is drawing a very clear picture of what a true follower of Christ should look like. It is one who will put God first, even before his family. It is a person who is not afraid to take up the cross and follow Jesus. "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Jesus, in this 10th chapter of Matthew, paints a picture of costly discipleship. He is calling us to have a type of discipleship that we are all called to but that cuts our familiar and comfortable lifestyles to bits and shatters the dreams we have for our lives. It's not an easy, feel-good path to take.

Following Jesus Christ is not smooth sailing. The world will often tell you that you are delusional and you will be passed off as a religious fanatic. Many will make a wide berth around you to avoid facing their own truth. As baptized Christians we all have moments in our personal lives in which Jesus comes with a sword and cuts our life in two, calling us to take up our cross and follow him, even to the point of losing our own lives. This is the messy life of discipleship. It's edgy and it changes everything, if we take up our cross and follow him.

But do not despair; we do have a promise which carries us forward. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." We are precious and important to God. We are eternally loved by the One who will never die.

If you have a sense of your calling I would love to hear about it. I will listen with you as you strive to live you're your calling. We all can do that for each other. It may be a calling into ministry. It may be a calling into the mission field. It may be a calling to tutor in our local schools, or to collect food for Sharing House, or to teach Sunday School, or to go to India and find ways to have a relationship with a church over there. It may be a calling to deepen your own existing vocation here in Brevard to be one that is as close to Christ's as it can be. Whatever we are called to do, I pray that we all will persevere as followers who have been deeply marked as Christ's own forever. In allowing ourselves to be cut out of our normal lives, we will be transformed by a new life in Jesus Christ. Amen.