

## THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 25, 2023

JEREMIAH 20:7-13 | PSALM 69:7-18 | ROMANS 6:1B-11 | MATTHEW 10:24-39

There's a form of art that's practiced in Japan called *kintsugi*. It comes from the word "golden joinery," and it goes back about five centuries or so. And the idea is that if you have a piece of pottery, a bowl or a vase, that's broken or cracked, you don't throw it out and get a new one. You take the pieces and put them back together using a kind of liquid gold. The idea is that the new bowl isn't just physically stronger than the original, but it's more beautiful. And the cracks that should be seen as flaws actually become marks of beauty. It isn't just a patched up version of the old bowl, but a new creation.

It helps to have that image in mind when we think about today's gospel reading. It's a reading that seems harsh and unnecessary. The larger problem, however, is that it also seems incoherent. After all, elsewhere in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. But today's gospel makes it sound like Jesus only meant loving neighbors who aren't related to us. If they're family, then—please, by all means—go ahead and be a jerk.

Matthew's first readers likely heard this text differently. We know that Matthew's audience were primarily Jewish Christ followers. For many of these people, their decision to become followers of Jesus, disciples of the Way, resulted in tension, conflict, and exclusion within their families. And this was particularly challenging because the household or the family, this set of relationships that you inherited when you were born, was the basic building block of society. To be rejected by your family or to be cast out of your household was an existential crisis.

For these first listeners, Jesus's statement that discipleship will likely entail family strife was not a strange hypothetical. It acknowledged a reality many of these people knew all too well. Far from coming across as harsh or unnecessary, Jesus's words may have been reassuring and comforting.

This is all interesting history and the kind of thing that excites people like Gerry Lauro and me. But is there anything here of value for us? I think there is. And the best way to see it is by reading today's gospel reading through today's reading from Romans.

In this selection, St. Paul writes about baptism. This is the only time he writes about baptism in Romans, and it's probably the most important baptismal text in the whole Bible. When we are baptized, he writes, we are baptized *into* Christ. And having been joined together, there is a dynamic exchange of experiences. Christ shares our experience of death so that we can share his experience of resurrection life. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his," Paul promises, "we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." To be joined to Jesus means leaving behind our old selves that try to find salvation in our own resources and efforts and receiving a new self that lives from the grace of God. So baptism brings about a change in us. It involves separation and joining. Losing and finding. Death and life.

If you read today's gospel reading through Romans, and it starts to sound a little bit different. Jesus no longer seems to be just smashing things for the heck of it. But you see him putting them back together in a new way. Far from saying that family isn't important, Jesus says that he's creating a new type of family. While we may get caught up in the man-against-father, daughter-against-mother lines, we may miss the kicker that comes right after them and which is far more important. "One's foes," Jesus says, "will be members of one's own household." Imagine Jesus as the artisan putting the bowl back together with gold.

If you were rejected by your family or cast of your household for following Jesus, Jesus promises you a new household. One that hasn't been given to you by accident of your birth but by

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the grace of God. A family filled with such an odd mix of people that when you pull up a seat at the table, you may find yourself sitting next to someone you thought was your enemy. Separation and joining. Losing and finding. Death and life.

And this is where we might think about Jesus's message in our own life together. It can be easy to mistake the world we've inherited for the world that has to exist. So often, when we say, "That's the way the world works," we're not talking about the laws of physics but the consequences of choices that we've made. So what have we inherited that is no longer life-giving to us? Where could we make different choices? Where in our relationships, systems, practices, and cultures do we need separating and joining, losing and finding, death and life?

There's a story that Bishop Curry, the Presiding Bishop in the Episcopal Church, tells about when he was a parish pastor in Chicago. And this guy came up to him after worship one day, and said, "I want to get baptized, but we need to do it in private." And Bishop Curry said, "You know, we normally do baptisms in public during 'regular' worship. So there would have to be a compelling reason." And the guy replies that he's having problems getting drawn into gang life. These gang affiliations aren't something you opt into, they're something that's often ascribed to you based on where you happen to live. You inherit it. And if people knew that he was talking to Bishop Curry, that could create a lot of problems for him.

So they make arrangements to do it in private with a couple of sponsors from the church. And they get to the renunciation questions at the beginning. *Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw you from God?* And Bishop Curry says that, until this experience, he never understood the gravity of those questions. They're not just a perfunctory box to check but an invitation to leave something behind and enter something new.

It's exactly the same invitation that Jesus gives to us in today's gospel. Those who lose their life for my sake will find it. In the body of Christ, there is separation and joining. Losing and finding. Death and new life.

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