

## THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 4, 2022

DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20 | PSALM 1 | PHILEMON 1:1-21 | LUKE 14:25-33

It's estimated that one in four Americans is estranged from someone in their family.<sup>1</sup> Four in ten have been estranged at some point. And even if you aren't technically capital-E estranged, many of us have strained relationships with people in our families and social circles. Some of us can't talk without fighting, others aren't talking at all, and sometimes we let the lawyers do the talking.

It's worth keeping that in mind when we hear the words of Jesus in today's gospel reading. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

It is easy to read those words as proscriptive, as an endorsement. As if Jesus is saying that if you want to be his disciple, then you need to start hating people. As if the way into the kingdom of God is through blowing up all your relationships, particularly our relationships with those we are closest to. *Come follow me*, says our Lord, *and I will make you burners of bridges*.

The meaning changes when we see them not as proscriptive but as descriptive. Not Jesus telling us how we should be, but Jesus describing how we actually are in our relationships with our families, our neighbors, and our communities. The word that Jesus uses for "hate" here often carries with it notions of separation or removal. Less about a system of beliefs we have in our heads than an experience of something that's been rent asunder. We often have the sense that our relationships with others are not quite the way they should be. And the tears in the fabric of those relationships is a great source of pain for us.

And, to stay in the text, we may even feel the same way about life itself. There is one individual I know who wakes up every morning convinced that it's going to be a great day, and they can't wait to experience all that life has to offer. That's my dog. The rest of us feel a little more ambivalent. People ask us how we're doing, and we say, "Fine." But we're also lonely, anxious, grieving, frustrated, nervous, burned out, or all the above. Even if we don't hate our lives, it's hard to shake the feeling that they're often not exactly what we imagined. Even if the fabric isn't torn, it's still pretty threadbare in certain places.

There's an idea that you see in church circles pretty frequently that those kinds of breaches aren't appropriate for disciples of Jesus. After all, our lives proclaim the gospel, so the lives of Jesus's disciples must appear to be perfect. Their homes will have white picket fences, 2.1 children, and a crowded table at Thanksgiving every year. Their careers will rocket to success, and they'll still have time to shovel their neighbors' driveway without breaking a sweat. Most important, they'll be relentlessly happy every minute of the day. And when people ask them how their life got so perfect, they'll say, "I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ." If that idea is in your head somewhere, I want you to take one of those magic erasers and scrub it out of your mind.

Because Jesus says the exact opposite. Jesus doesn't say that if you want to be my disciple, you need to have life figured out. You need to have the perfect family. The perfect home. The perfect career. The perfect attitude. No, Jesus says that if you're someone who feels the pain of estrangement, the grief of loss, or the sheer angst of existence, you can be my disciple. To be a disciple of Jesus, you only need to desire to mend the breaches in our world. And if you're someone

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<sup>1</sup> "How Many American Children Have Cut Contact with Their Parents? | The Economist," accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2021/05/20/how-many-american-children-have-cut-contact-with-their-parents>.

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who knows the pain and loss and grief and confusion of life, then you're someone who can follow Jesus into the world to bear its burdens and heal its wounds.

Because Jesus knows what it feels like to carry those burdens. Does Jesus have a perfect relationship with his family? Nope. It's complicated.<sup>2</sup> His ministry is a big source of stress and anxiety. Does Jesus have a great reputation in his hometown? Nope. They chase him out of town after he preaches in the synagogue. Does Jesus have a perfect sense of his calling in life? No. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus prays, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done." Jesus knows what it means to grieve and lament and be frustrated by the varied turns of life.

Instead of saying that we need to get our lives to a certain place before we can follow Jesus, Jesus comes and meets us where we are. That is, in a sense, really what the gospel is all about. It is not that if you follow Jesus, you're going to have a fantastically successful life. It is not if you follow Jesus, you will be the envy of your neighbors and your peers. Or even that you'll be particularly happy. It is simply that because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we never have to experience life alone. Wherever there is loss and death and pain and estrangement, God is already there. That whenever we carry our cross, Jesus always carries it with us.

And the way we redeem our grief is not by avoiding it ("Everything's fine...") or allowing it to make us exceptional ("No one knows what I'm going through..."). But by using it to understand the pain and suffering of those around us more deeply. To listen to their disappointments, their stresses, their laments, and see them not as separate from ours, but as shared wounds in the body of Christ. We could say that Jesus carries our cross so that we can carry our neighbor's.

This is, to put it mildly, counterintuitive. It is for us today, and it was to Jesus's first hearers.<sup>3</sup> Sure enough, in the decades after St. Luke's gospel was written, one of the criticisms leveled against Christians was that they were atheists. That these early believers actually didn't believe in God. This criticism seems bizarre at first. How could anyone think they were atheists? But people thought that because the first followers of Jesus didn't build a temple or a shrine or a sanctuary. They didn't go on pilgrimages. They didn't have a central place that was considered holy. And so people looked at these early believers and said, "Well, since they don't believe God exists somewhere, they must not actually believe in God."

As we know—and as Jesus reminds us in today's gospel reading—it's actually just the opposite. They didn't go away on pilgrimages because God didn't happen somewhere else. God happens here. In places like these. In times like these. In lives like ours. Whenever we think that we need to get away to get closer to God, away from our grief, away from our pain, away from our distress, away from our lives, we are forgetting that Jesus is already right here. In our grief and joy. In our successes and problems. In life and death. The body of Christ, given for us.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 8:19-21. "Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. 20 And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." 21 But he said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.""

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973).

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