

“Losing and Gaining”

“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Troy and Sons were locksmiths who had served my hometown for generations. Most homes and businesses had locks and alarm systems that had been installed by the company, and most of the keys carried by people in the community had their name etched on them. The company had been a family business for four generations, and in each generation two or three brothers worked together to carry on the family business. Troy and Sons was an institution in the community; no one could conceive of calling anyone else when they needed locks installed or new keys made. So it came as a shock when it was announced that Troy and Sons would be closing – not because they had lost customers or the business was no longer profitable, but because the next generation of sons had no interest in the family business. The current generation of brothers tried to bring on partners outside the family, but because the business was so connected with their family such efforts proved unsuccessful. While there was great disappointment in the family and community, the decision of the sons to pursue other careers was understandable, and there was no animosity even though it was a sad day when Troy and Sons closed their doors.

Many family businesses have depended on the next generation to take over from their parents and continue the work that has been central to the family’s identity as well as its means of earning a living. The expectations can be so strong and the pressure on the children to take over the business so great that there can be great tension and conflict when the upcoming generation balks at taking over the family business, when children inform their parents that they will be pursuing another career path. Even when their desired vocation is something as noble as becoming a doctor or an accountant or a lawyer, any path that takes them away from the family business can create deep resentments from the generation that expected their children to continue the business that had been central to the family’s identity; such conflict between generations can tear apart the very ties that bind these families together.

When Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee in Matthew’s Gospel, he encounters two family businesses on its shores. He meets two sets of brothers – Simon Peter and

Andrew, James and John – who are engaged in the family fishing business. They may even have been working in a family business that was identified by the same of their fathers – “Zebedee and Sons” for James and John, “Jonah and Sons” for Simon Peter and Andrew. But then Jesus meets them, he issues an invitation to another path: *“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”* (Matthew 4:19). Their response is immediate; both sets of brothers left their nets and boats, their fathers and family businesses, and followed Jesus. Matthew does not record the reaction of the fathers when they discover that their sons have abandoned the family and their business responsibility, and we never hear from them again; but it would be understandable if this decision to accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship caused a rift in the bonds that bound these sons to their fathers and to the family that depended on their work to continue the business.

The decision to accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship is one that comes at a cost not only to one’s human relationships but in the way others treat Jesus’ disciples and the challenges and opposition they will encounter as they follow the one who Peter will confess as *“the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* (Matthew 16:16). Today’s Gospel lesson is centered on Jesus’ teaching his disciples challenges and the cost of being his disciples. Jesus begins this teaching with the proverbial wisdom that *“a disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master”* (10:24-25a). While it was expected that a disciple would become like the teacher that mentors them, Jesus’ disciples do not anticipate how harshly their teacher and Lord will be rejected and that they may suffer the same fate. As Jesus has been persecuted, likewise will the disciples face persecution. As Jesus’ opponents *“have called the master of the house Beelzebul”* (10:25b), a name for Satan that literally means “Lord of the house,” with reference to Satan’s power in this world, so also will they use such accusations to *“malign those of his household!”* The Pharisees have accused Jesus of driving out demons by the power of *“Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons”* (12:24); on the basis of such an accusation, they will plot to kill him (*“But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him”* (12:14). If this is what they will do to the *“master of the house,”* those of the household should not expect better treatment; they too will be rejected and persecuted.

Jesus anticipates that his warnings may be causing great fear and anxiety among his disciples, so he encourages his followers to *“have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known”* (10:26). Jesus’ words are addressed to discipleship who already profess the Christian faith, but who are fearful of bearing public witness to it in their mission. Jesus is entrusting his gospel mission to his disciples, and others will be dependent

on them to proclaim this message for their salvation. What they have learned from Jesus they must “*tell in the light,*” not being afraid to “*proclaim [it] from the housetops*” (10:27). The disciples’ message is in continuity with Jesus in proclaiming the kingdom of God (“*As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’*” – 10:7). But the disciples not only preach what Jesus preached but proclaim him as Lord and Messiah. The criterion for judgment will be the disciples’ present confession of Jesus or lack thereof; their fear is not to be of “*those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell*” (10:28).

- “Though they will face threats, they should not fear those who can harm the body but cannot touch the soul. Instead, they are to trust in God’s care, knowing that even the hairs on their head are counted. Ultimately, Jesus reminds his hearers of their traditional understanding that God knows all that can be known. He is keeping account, such that even the secret things will one day be made clearly known.” – Danny Zacharias.

Jesus’ next teaching is harsh and is usually included among Jesus’ “difficult sayings,” words that some people find incongruous with the gentler teachings of our Lord. It may seem especially inappropriate on this Fathers’ Day as we celebrate fathers and those who have been father figures in our lives, people with whom we share love and who have a special place in our lives and memories. But we must remember that this text reflects the real situation in Matthew’s church, where people sometimes had to choose between their family and their faith. Jesus begins with a statement that appears to be in opposition to his identity as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah we often hear at Christmas which proclaims that “*a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*” (Isaiah 9:6). Instead of being the one who brings peace, Jesus warns his listeners “*do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*” (10:34). “Sword” was an image in Scripture of the final conflict at the end of the age as well as a symbol of suffering and discord:

- “For by fire will the LORD execute judgment, and by his sword, on all flesh, and those slain by the LORD shall be many” – Isaiah 66:16.
- “Fire and hail and famine and pestilence, all these have been created for vengeance; the fangs of wild animals and scorpions and vipers, and the sword that punishes the ungodly with destruction.” – Sirach 39:29-30.

- “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” – Luke 2:34-35.

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God will cause division not because of the message itself but because of the ways people receive it. Responses will vary from full acceptance to hostile rejection, and this will cause division and even hostility within families. Jesus repeats the warning from the prophet Micah that the greatest opposition his followers may face may come from the people with whom they are the closest:

- “Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.” – Micah 7:5-6.

As the prophet had warned the faithful of his generation of the opposition they may face even within their own families, Jesus warns his followers that *“I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household”* (10:35-36). In ancient Jewish culture, in which family relationships were so important, Jesus’ words were quite demanding and very shocking; *“Jesus says loyalty to him even before one’s family is the mark of true discipleship.”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). Loyalty to Jesus has priority over even the closest human relationships and life itself. Discipleship is represented not as adding another worthy cause to one’s list of obligations, but in giving of self that is ultimate self-fulfillment. The discourse that begins with Jesus conferring authority and power on his disciples concludes with the necessity of sharing in Jesus’ sacrifice that means that each follower must *“take up the cross and follow me”* (10:38).

- “This statement, made before his crucifixion, foreshadows the cost of discipleship. To take up the cross is to embrace a way of life marked by sacrifice, service, and faithfulness. Jesus’ words affirm that discipleship is not about personal gain but about embodying God’s love and justice in the world.” – Zacharias.

In order to make sense of Jesus’ harsh words about family relationships, it is helpful to remember the context in which many of Jesus’ early followers lived and the reactions they faced when they announced to their families that they had become

disciples of Christ. Jewish Christians often faced backlash from their families and from the wider Jewish community who had rejected Jesus as their Messiah (“... *the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue*” – John 9:22). Non-Jewish Christians also faced such backlash and animosity from their families, since confessing Jesus Christ as Lord placed them in opposition to the Roman society that worshiped the emperor as a god; honouring a God other than Caesar would be considered an act of treason and often led to expulsion from one’s family and community, a situation that is addressed in the first letter of Peter where the Apostle proclaims a message of hope to people who have suffered such devastating losses because of their confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

- “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” – 1 Peter 2:9-10.

While not every disciple will be called to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the Gospel, nor will all followers of Jesus be rejected by their families and communities because of their decision to follow Jesus, all are called to sacrifice in some way for the sake of their calling; for “*those who find their life will lose it, and those who lost their life for my sake will find it*” (10:39). True life is found not in accumulation of personal achievement but in living in right relationship with our Lord, with the community of Christ’s disciples, and in having the privilege of sharing God’s liberating Word; “*Jesus’ words invite his followers into this reality – where life is defined not by status or security but by faithfulness to God’s call.*” (Zacharias).

- “Those who seek happiness in life by pursuing their own interests will never be fulfilled. Only by giving one’s self to God and others do we experience the lasting fulfillment God wants us to have ... Therefore, when Jesus says the true disciple must ‘take up his cross,’ he is not merely calling for acceptance of life’s little inconveniences and hardships. He is calling his disciples to be willing to give up everything, even their lives, if necessary, to follow him.” – Mitch and Sri.

As we celebrate Fathers’ Day this morning, I give thanks for my father and my mother who always supported me when I first began to speak of entering the seminary and becoming a pastor. I had my moments of doubt and struggle, but I never doubted that they were always on my side and supported this call to serve our

Lord. But not all of my seminary classmates had such support; I still remember our seminary graduation and one classmate whose family circumstances were very different from many of us. He had never spoken about his family background, but on the day of graduation as my family and the families of many of the graduates sat around them, he sat by himself. When I met him on campus later that year, he shared with me his difficult journey to graduation and ordination. His family had founded a prestigious law firm in the Philadelphia area and expected him to carry on the tradition by going to law school and being admitted to the bar. Even though they had been active in their local congregation, when he announced that he was entering the seminary it caused great tension that led to a rift between him and the rest of his family, who could not understand why he would choose a profession that was not as prestigious or profitable in their eyes as their very profitable firm. They had essentially disowned him and refused to even attend his graduation ceremony; seeing him by himself reminded me that many people still suffer the fate that Jesus has warned his disciples about when they accept that invitation to serve in the name of our Lord.

- “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call ... The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life. The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus’ sake.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

It was a sad day for the Troy family and the entire community when Troy and Sons closed; but surprisingly, while the family was somewhat melancholy at the ending of their family business, there was no hint of anger or animosity at their children for choosing another career path. When he was asked about it, Ken Troy said that he was proud of his sons for the path they had chosen and thankful for the years his family had been blessed with their business. “It is where God is calling them, and we know that God will bless them as God has blessed us!”

The call to discipleship, accepting our Lord’s invitation to follow him, comes with a cost, which at times can be painful and disruptive. But as Paul shares in his letter to the Philippians, whatever costs or sacrifices we may have to make in our decision to follow Jesus pale in comparison to the riches that are ours as his disciples:

- “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.” – Philippians 3:12-16.

The ties that bind us to our families may become frayed when we decide to accept our Lord’s invitation to discipleship, but the ties that bind us together as children of God remain strong and resolute. We pray for reconciliation among families who are experiencing division and discord because of the decision of their children, even as we give thanks that through baptism we have been born anew as children of God with the assurance that “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever; his the loving purpose solely to preserve them, pure and holy.*” (ELW Hymn 781).

Amen.