

Cornel Barnett  
Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 10:24-39  
Unsettling Spirituality

The sermon last Sunday focused on fathers for Father's Day. We heard wonderful stories about fathers from Georgene, Alan and Diane.

My immediate family and Alan had a Father's Day outing at Crissy Field in San Francisco. In this sublime setting, we enjoyed a picnic, rested, and played with a soccer and bocce ball and tossed a Frisbee.

As Father's Day celebrations go, our worship service and our outing were very special. All round, familial vibes were good.

It comes then as a great surprise to hear Jesus countering this reverie with unsettling spirituality in today's gospel text.

He says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For 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."

So much for Happy Father's Day or Happy Mother's Day celebrations and so much for family affirmations. At the expense of sounding blasphemous, Jesus is a killjoy. The peacemaker is a warmonger. Yet, since Jesus is our primary teacher of peace and goodwill, there must be something deeper going on here.

The key comes in what he says next. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

In other words, whenever love of father, mother, sister, brother, mother-in-law, cousin, niece, nephew, grandparents or grandchildren gets in the way of one's love of and faithfulness to God in Christ, one must evaluate that relationship and be open to discord instead of compromise for the sake of the gospel.

An example: I spoke about my biological father last Sunday. I said, "I never knew my biological father since he and my mother divorced when I was a baby due to his excessive drinking and disruptive behavior."

When I say I never knew him I meant that he was never in my life physically while I grew from babyhood to adulthood. He never influenced my values or behavior. Boarding school did much of that.

I met him in my early twenties. He saw an article of me in a newspaper when I made the national team in surfing. He visited my hometown, the beach city of Durban, South Africa, and enquired from surfers of my whereabouts.

I was at the beach one day when he approached me and said he was my father. He wanted a chat. I was more curious than excited about the visit.

We sat on a park bench and had a discussion. He was slightly inebriated and said he drank alcohol his entire life. He wanted to reunite and establish an ongoing relationship. I resented the suggestion.

He was a stranger to me and I had hard feelings about his drunken abuse of my mother to the extent that she never wanted anything do to with him. She sacrificed alimony for a peaceful life without him. As a result, we struggled as a family although my mother was a competent and hard-working banker. The pay for women for equal work was way below that of men in those days. I experienced as a child the “feminization of poverty.”

I said I was open to a relationship with him on condition that he made a good faith effort to give up drinking. I saw no value in relating with him as a drunk. I encouraged him to attend AA meetings and after he had done so with a record of accomplishment, to visit with me again, and we would go from there.

Although I didn't theologize my meeting back then I can see this arrangement as an interpretation of Jesus' words, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

For me, to love Jesus more was to encourage the best relationship I could with my father. To be in a relationship with my father in his drunken and potentially abusive state was to love him more than I loved Jesus. My cross was to sacrifice a relationship with my father for the sake of a healthy Christ-centered relationship with him.

My father said he would not go to AA and would not stop drinking. He wanted a relationship on his own drunken terms. He wanted cheap and opposed to costly grace. I replied that in that case I did not want to have anything to do with him.

Now, I understand Jesus' words, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For 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."

I had to cut the relationship. I was "set" against my father for the sake of a more centered, healthy relationship in Christ. It was a tough decision but the only one I could make at that time. I understand now that when my father said he *would* not give up drinking, he probably meant he *could* not. He was being honest about his struggle.

A greater intervention was needed than I could give as surfer and young man entering the work world. A few years later, I received a letter from him saying he was attending a Pentecostal Church in a distant town. Members of the church adopted him and he was boarding in their home. He had become a Christian and had given up drinking.

He was sober and wanted to visit me again. I was open to a visit but shortly thereafter, I received letter from his homeowner saying he was knocked down and killed by a car while crossing the street.

Jesus is quite realistic about family relationships. All families are not as wholesome and healthy and connected as we heard from Diane, Georgene and Alan. Personal and substance abuse issues like mine separate a few.

Further, when Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," he anticipates a variety of family and societal discords.

We know of families who split over politics. This gets tricky because each side might think that their political alliances correspond with their spirituality: Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, etc.

In Christianity alone, there are differences, struggles, and even animosity around issues: pro-choice/pro-life, abortion/anti-abortion, and pro-gay/anti-gay, single payer medical coverage vs. insurance-based coverage, etc. Everyone sort of believes that Jesus is on her or his side. Excellent examples of this within our own Presbyterian family took place at last week's General Assembly in Detroit.

There are peace and justice issues where one sees inequities in the world and one wants to do something about it. One challenges systems and policies that one sees that go counter to what God in Christ desires for the world. One supports peace and justice movements and actions like anti-war marches, the Occupy Movement and pushes for a sustainable universe and finds oneself alienated from one's own family members. Perhaps the sword of strife is to stay the course with one's view and the truth will win in the end. Let us hope that decisions at last week's GA do not alienate members of our denomination.

I met a man in the Y in Jacksonville, Florida, who lost his job because he went on a peace march. His corporate family disowned him. He picked up his cross to follow Jesus, as he understood Jesus to be and lost his job. That's an amazing sacrifice.

This man's experience goes to beginning of the text read today where Jesus states that critics of your faith will call you "Beelzebul," you'll be called a devil, but encourages the faithful to "have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known."

The bottom line in all this is to be as faithful as we can to the message of the gospel, to affirm love, caring and compassion, and life and wholeness in Christ, the best we can and to know that when we do it, it might (perhaps will) cause strife, alienation, separation, discord and disharmony within one's family and in society. That's our cross.

This is an unsettling spirituality and yet we know that to be faithful, in other words, to love Jesus more than anything else in the world is to serve God in the world the best we can and know to that our interpretation of the gospel is not the final interpretation. Presbyterians, especially, are always open to new insights and revelations as we continue to seek Christ's mind in all things.

I might have a different approach to my father if I met him today. It might be more unsettling. Amen.