

Sermon – Behind and Before

Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Luke 14: 25-33

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Rev. Hannah Dreitcer

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, IL

Our first reading is from Jeremiah 18:1-11. Jeremiah, a reluctant prophet, is instructed by God to bring the people a message built on the image of a potter at work. Hear now God's holy Word.

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: **2** "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." **3** So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. **4** The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. **5** Then the word of the Lord came to me: **6** Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. **7** At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, **8** but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. **9** And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, **10** but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. **11** Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. Amen.

Our second reading is from Luke, chapter 14, verses 25-33. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

25 Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, **26** "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. **27** Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. **28** For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? **29** Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, **30** saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." **31** Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? **32** If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. **33** So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

The Word of the Lord.

The Title of the Sermon: Behind and Before

The text: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Luke 14:33

Let us pray: Creator God, you form us on the wheel of life as a potter molds the clay. Shape us into holy vessels, bearing the mark of your wise crafting. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

On Wednesday, I met up with Jack Sherrick. Over the past two years he's borrowed several books from me, and in true Jack Sherrick-fashion, he wanted to make sure first, that he returned them all before heading to college on Monday, and second, that we had a chance to discuss them in depth.

Our conversation quickly turned to Scripture, and how to read it—specifically, how to read the hard parts, the stories and passages that seem about as far from the overwhelming and abundant love of God as possible.

And I've been thinking a lot since then about how we read the Bible. So often, as I come to a text, either in my own devotional time or in preparing to preach, I find myself wishing Jesus had been just a little more straightforward as I study the Greek and read the chapters before and after in a desperate search for clarity and direction for faithful living.

And then sometimes, like this week, I find myself studying the Greek and reading most of Luke in a desperate search to make Jesus mean something other than the very straightforward thing he seems to be saying.

Because I love family. I kind of like my stuff, too. I like being liked by all of you (and I like keeping Dr. Kieffer's blood pressure down!), and so I really, really was hoping I would find some way of not having to get up here and say that Jesus means exactly what he said—that to follow Christ and live faithfully, we need to hate our family, hate our own lives, and give up all our possessions.

Believe me—I've looked.

I focused particularly on this word “hate”. I sailed in confidently, knowing that often there are several layers and many meanings to such words when we turn to the original languages.

Surely Jesus cannot truly be commanding us to hate our families and our lives. It seems to go against everything else in Scripture. Honoring our parents is one of the Ten Commandments!

The word translated as “hate” here in Luke is *miseo* in the Greek. And *miseo* means—hate. It has also shown up in such verses as “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man” and ““But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”

There is nothing soft about this word, no way to negotiate our way out of it grammatically. It is shockingly literal for Jesus, and it is shocking.

I won't make you pick up your Bibles and read (though I was considering it), but I want you to imagine this scene with me.

The Transfiguration is behind Jesus, and the crucifixion is before him. He has come down off the mountain and set his face toward Jerusalem, and all that awaits him there.

He has been revealed to his disciples, and he has told them what is coming, that painful, disgraceful death on a cross lies before him.

But they still don't quite seem to get it.

And meanwhile his fame is growing, and the crowd that follows him is growing, and he keeps trying to tell them what he is there to teach them. Over and over he has told them about the kingdom of God, where all will sit together as God's beloved children. And over and over again he has mourned as his listeners just don't get it.

And as he goes along to Jerusalem, a large crowd is traveling with him—a crowd of people each with their own expectations and understandings, curious about what this teacher with his new ideas can provide for them, individuals who maybe melt away when the Pharisees show up to scold, or who are taking the opportunity to sell snacks or souvenirs to fellow travelers, or who will only be able to be there for a few days before having to return home to fulfill family obligations, a crowd that keeps misunderstanding what he says to them, a crowd that keeps finding ways out of changing their lives—

And in exasperation, Jesus turns to this crowd that still just isn't getting it and tells them that anyone who does not HATE their parents, and their spouses, and their children, and their siblings cannot be his disciple. That anyone who does not take up the cross—the instrument of painful, disgraceful, public death—cannot be his disciple. That anyone who does not give up everything they own cannot be his disciple.

This is harsh. This is stark. This is difficult to preach on Labor Day weekend.

This is shocking language.

This has always been shocking. Christ's listeners have always been uneasy about this, and unsure about just how seriously to take it.

Francis of Assisi took it literally. He gave up all he had, renounced his position in the world, and lived the rest of his life in poverty, caring for the poor and abandoned. And he became the beloved Saint Francis.

John Calvin and other theologians, less beloved, took it more metaphorically, focusing on spiritual ways of taking up the cross.

And in the thousands of years it has been read and preached on, I don't know of many congregations--nor pastors--who ran out from the sanctuary to renounce their families and possessions.

Yet Jesus' rhetoric is stark, and strong, and straightforward.

And perhaps that's exactly what he intends.

With this harsh rhetoric, Jesus—a master teacher and preacher, Son of God here on earth for only a short time, knowing the urgency of his message—shocks his listeners into paying attention.

Jesus, usually the master of nuance and many layers, uses the strongest language possible, devoid of any possible interpretive work-arounds, to jar the crowd out of their own expectations and into a serious contemplation of this path they are on.

Jesus uses the strongest language possible to jar us out of our own expectations and to consider the things that distract us from faithful living by dividing us from each other: things like family and possessions.

Though we might not like it, we can figure out how our attachment to our possessions can divide us. When we leave our houses we lock the doors to protect our things, to keep others out, securing literal walls and barriers on behalf of our possessions.

And those houses often take up more space than we need, in order to shelter our many things, even as other humans live without shelter of their own.

Our possessions can also divide us into those who consume and those who produce—especially those who produce in unsafe working conditions, or for unsustainable wages.

Possessions can lead us into greed, into envy, into all kinds of division between us and others.

Family is harder to understand, for family is good and important in a way that possessions can never be. Our families are there to protect us and love us, to nurture us and sustain us and encourage us. When families don't do so, we consider this a grave failing.

Yet here in his harsh and shocking rhetoric, Jesus calls us to denounce our family as well as our possessions.

Because family can also become an exclusive circle—the group of people we mark out as worthy of our love and protection and encouragement and respect.

And writ larger, family becomes the basis for culture, for race, for ethnicity—for those who are mine and those who aren't.

Family can become the all-important us, in comparison with the less-worthy *them*.

Family can create divisions between us, and make us think only some people are worth our time, our respect, and our love.

And in his harsh rhetoric, as Jesus calls us to hate our families, and give up our possessions, we are called by shocking language to consider the barriers between us, and to hate these barriers that separate us.

For as Jesus keeps trying to teach us, nothing can separate us from one another in Christ.

This passage is not easy. It is not comfortable, and never has been.

But in it Jesus offers us an invitation—give up our possessions, give up our allegiances, give up all divisions, and come be a disciple.

I don't think it's a coincidence that taking up the cross is also mentioned. Because this is painful, and hard, and costly.

The language will never soften, no matter how often we read it, and so Jesus is always setting this invitation before us, always getting our attention with a difficult and shocking command, and as we walk the path of faith, we are offered a continual invitation, even as we are told the cost of accepting it.

We are meant to be shocked—meant to be made uncomfortable, meant to be always considering what it means for our lives to hate and tear down anything that separates us from another of God's children.

And perhaps this invitation is impossible—after all, there's probably a good reason why Francis of Assisi is one of the most famous and beloved saints of all time: none of us can turn our backs on family and possessions as he did—but even in its impossibility, this vision of life without divisions and barriers is always before us, and Christ is always urging us toward it.

And as we walk the path of faith and discipleship, we remember what we hear from Jeremiah, that we are clay in the hands of our potter, and that we are clay not yet fired. We are still able to take many shapes, able to be re-formed and re-made, able to change and be changed. No matter what decisions or barriers or division lie behind us, new life is ever before us.

And if we are made too uncomfortable, too uncertain, remember this: Jesus follows this shocking language of hate with some of the most beautiful and comforting parables he ever tells—the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son: parables of love, of searching for the lost and of being found, of reunion, of reconciliation, and of unity.

He does not end with the shocking and harsh rhetoric of today's passage, but uses it to catch the attention of his listeners, both that great crowd traveling with him, and the crowd listening to him today, so that we might be invited into the vision of unity found in God's kingdom. His conclusion is not hate, but a father running to welcome a lost son home.

Division is behind us, division that will constantly threaten our journey as disciples.

And Christ calls us ever forward to renounce that division, even to hate it. Christ invites us to struggle with all that separates us from others, to break down those barriers and walls so that we might live into the unity and reconciliation known in God, where we offer the same care, honor, and love to strangers that we offer to family.

This invitation is before us. This invitation will always be before us, for as we walk through life, we will always be called to be disciples, together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.