

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus as he went on his way towards Jerusalem. And he turned around and saw them all behind them. He was startled and he said, "You don't understand where I am going. Whoever comes to me and follows me and doesn't hate his father and mother, wife or husband and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life itself, cannot be my disciple."

And he looked up and pointed to the side of the road ahead where there were criminals and terrorists hanged by the Romans on crosses to die and he continued, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Then he turned and pointed to a large tower that was being built as a guard post to protect the garrison at Jerusalem and said, "It's like a rich man when he decides to build a tower. Doesn't he first sit down and estimate the cost to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise when he has made a beginning, laid the foundation and is not able to complete it, everyone looking on will ridicule him and say, 'This fellow has bit off more than he can chew.'

"Or what about a ruler going out to wage war against another king, wouldn't he sit down first and carefully calculate whether with his ten thousand he'd be able to defeat the twenty thousand coming against him with? If not, then while there's still time, he negotiate peace terms.

"So I urge you consider well the cost of your decision to follow me any further. Turn back before its too late because only a few, only a remnant in any age can ever have the clarity, and that's why to be my disciple you have to give up all you possess and that possesses you."

Crowds

Especially in Luke's gospel Jesus is wary of crowds. Obviously they're dangerous because they draw the attention of his enemies to him and to his mission making it more likely that he would be executed before he reached his goal. But also, as we've seen so powerfully in this season of political conventions, the larger and more hyped up the crowd the less likely it is that truth can be told or heard. In a crowd individual responsibility is overshadowed. It's unlikely that unpopular views will be voiced. Social pressure, usually more hidden, is palpable and frightening.

Jesus, Family Values and Thinning the Crowds

So Jesus here as elsewhere seems at pains to thin the crowd, to send as many away as he can. He does this by being as scandalous as he can be. This talk about “hating” your family and your own life is hyperbole of course. But it’s not only that. There are a number of places in the gospels where Jesus is quite clearly speaking against what we might call “traditional Christian family values.” He’s really rarely a good spokesman for the so-called “Christian right.” In Mark, for instance, he says he came to turn parents against children and children against parents. Apparently what he came to do deconstructs the social consensus. Christianity will always be subversive of the culture of any society because all human culture is based on violence and idolatry.

Philemon

One of my very favorite places to see that is in the letter of Paul to Philemon. Philemon was a prominent wealthy citizen of the Roman Empire, possibly an officer of the Roman army who retired to one of the cities built by Rome in Asia Minor, the area now known as Turkey. On his travels we know that Paul preached to Philemon and converted him and his wife, Apphia, and their son or servant Archippus, because he addresses a unique letter preserved as one of the New Testament Epistles to them. It’s unique because it is the only such letter addressed in detail to a personal circumstance rather than to a concern of the whole church. But I may be overstating that. What do you think?

Onesimus

This letter addressed to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the “church in your house” is written in Paul’s own hand while he is in prison in Rome and carried by one Onesimus. What makes this particularly dramatic is that the letter is about the one who is carrying it. Now whether Onesimus knew the content of the letter is unclear and, like so many details of this situation open to speculative imagination. But it is very important because Onesimus, whom Paul has met in Rome, is coincidentally a runaway slave, the property of this very Philemon. Paul says in the letter that Onesimus has become “his son” just as Philemon had earlier become his “son.” Under Roman law known as *pater potestas* which was the cornerstone of the Roman family system, a runaway slave could be killed by his master, as could a disobedient child be killed by his father.

Philemon at the Club

But Paul is pleading that Onesimus be given his freedom as a favor to Paul “on the basis of love.” I like to think of Philemon surrounded by his peers among the Roman elite in his city. How would he be regarded by them should he free his runaway slave?

It reminds me of Luke's amazing story of the Prodigal Son who though he refused to respect his father giving up his status as son, was welcomed back lavishly by his father. How the neighbors must have talked, clucked and scorned the old man for being taken in again by his ne'er do well son. Imagine Philemon explaining to his friends at the yacht club how he came to forgive his runaway slave, to free him, and to welcome him back as a brother, as an equal. You begin to see how subversive Christianity is of the established order of the age.

James T.

Or think in our own diocese about James Trammel a convicted murderer who has served 18 years in the State Penitentiary. This past July, James having been duly scrutinized and supported by the commission on ministry and the bishop of California was ordained to the diaconate by Bishop Swing inside Solano State prison. By ordaining James the church is doing far more to break down the dehumanization of prison than it could by speaking out against the injustices of the system. [Ed. Note: James Trammel was granted parole in Fall 2004]

Give up All You Possess

When Jesus says you can't be my disciple until you give up all you possess, he's talking about giving up the identity that our place in the social structure provides us by letting go of the things that are the symbols and supports of that identity. The things we possess, our status, our money, our reputation in the community, things we cling to as things we have earned, these actually possess us. Giving these things away allows us to receive them back as gift, to receive our life back, as we hope Onesimus does by being freed by Philemon out of love, voluntarily and not as something forced.

Conner's Parents

I want to close with a story I think fits here. Before I do I want to set it up by telling you about a scene from a great film called Mass Appeal. Originally a stage play, it starred Jack Lemmon and was filmed at All Saints, Pasadena. It's about an old cynical priest who's trying to teach his young idealistic seminarian some of his wisdom. They are called to the home of a relatively young woman whose husband has died suddenly. The old priest is talking to the widow in the kitchen while the young seminarian sits quietly opposite the teenage daughter in the dining room. The contrast between the banal platitudes of the one and the poignant silence of the other are highlighted when the seminarian reaches out his hand to silently take the sobbing young woman's hand in his.

Later they debrief together and the older priest explains that his strategy was to convince the widow of the "inconsolability" of her grief. And then he adds,

“inconsolability is a very exalted position to have.” I love that line because there is an important seed of truth in it, and I would never want to rob a person of the inconsolability of their grief. Now I want to tell you what I saw a couple of weeks ago at the service for Connor Bell. Some of you were there and saw it too.

It was simply this: his mother and father stood up at the service and spoke. That’s not something I would ever suggest to anyone, and even then I was ready for them at the last minute to be overcome by their grief. It was an amazing thing, not only because they were able, mother first and then father, to pull it off but because of what it signaled to the shocked and bereaved congregation who gathered. It signaled somehow that their grief was not private, not their own possession. If they had simply been dissolved in tears no one would have been surprised. Everyone would have thought it was appropriate. But to stand up and talk about their dead son was effectively to give him and their grief as a gift to the congregation and the community they represented. They “died,” we might say, to the inconsolability of their grief, and in doing so they effectively shared him and the depth of their loss with others. It was a remarkable gift and I trust it has helped all of us to deal with his death.

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