

Oh, *Those Family Values* [Text - Matthew 10:24-39]

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Today's New Testament reading is a tough one, particularly on a day when we welcome new members into our own Family of Faith. Jesus says, "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 are really rough words - words that don't quite sound like what we'd expect to hear from Jesus - yet here they are.

Jesus says that in order to follow him, we must be willing to let go of our old family or social allegiances; *and* we must be willing to experience a crucifixion of our own. Some scholars think that these words about taking up one's cross were added by Matthew, years after the Resurrection. Matthew is writing to a predominately *Jewish-Christian* community - to people who, by following Jesus as their Messiah, probably faced some extremely harsh rejection from their own families, and persecution from their former family of faith. So for Matthew and others like him, following Jesus could be a truly costly venture. What Jesus says to them, and to us is, "Don't be so surprised!"

Jesus himself faced condemnation and rejection from many within his own family of faith. There were even some Jewish leaders who said that Jesus could cast-out demons only because he was the son of Beelzebul - the Lord of the Flies - the Devil Himself. So if Jesus, the teacher and master, is so readily rejected and harshly persecuted, then his followers should also expect more of the same - even from those within their own families, or former faith families.

And as if this potential conflict with our families and friends wasn't menacing enough, Jesus kicks it up a notch by saying, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword!" Wow! As my grandma Harriet would say, "Well that doesn't sound very Christian!" However, this "sword" of which Jesus speaks, isn't a sword of *war*, it's a *dividing* sword - one that *could* separate father from son, mother from daughter, brothers and sisters. It's not that Jesus comes with the intention of dividing families or communities. It's just that following

Jesus as the Messiah - God's Chosen One - can be a costly journey; particularly for those whose own families hold to a different value system. The "Family Values" that Jesus teaches, do *not* include hatred or violence, selfishness or greed, bigotry or intolerance. Therefore, those who come from families or groups that embrace those damaging characteristics, should be prepared to be attacked and rejected - just like Jesus was.

Now before any of our new, or old, BUCC family members head for the exits, let me point out that there's actually a tremendous amount of *Good News* in Jesus' teaching. In spite of the difficult words in this text, there's also an extremely hopeful message: "Have no fear...do not be afraid...fear not!" Three different times, in three different ways, Jesus reassures his followers that, in spite of how other people may see us or treat us, our Heavenly Parent will watch over us and keep us secure. And we can experience that security when we stop listening to those familiar voices of judgement, fear and condemnation, and listen instead to the voice of our Loving Heavenly Parent - the One who cares for all of us - the One who is even aware when the smallest sparrow falls from the sky.

To have *faith* in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, means that you and I can truly *trust* that we are completely loved sons and daughters of our One Heavenly Parent. It also means that we can love one another fully, freely, and fearlessly. Our fears tell us that if we open our hearts or expand our minds or extend ourselves too far, we could end up falling or failing. If we give too much to others, we may not have enough for ourselves. If we love too deeply, we may end up being hurt or rejected. Jesus tells us, and shows us, that this is a *very real possibility!*

Jesus himself is maligned and mistreated because of his undying willingness to reach out to the poor and the outcast, the struggling and hurting people around him. Yet through it all, he doesn't stop proclaiming God's love for all people. Even when those who fear him have him nailed to a cross, Jesus still speaks words of forgiveness, hope, and love. The crucial message of Jesus Christ is that there is nothing that can ever separate us from the Love of God! And the sure sign of that message, is Christ's Resurrection.

Jesus says, "Do not be afraid... For those who would save their life will lose it, and those who will lose their life for my sake will find it." It can be extremely comforting to cling to those things, or ideas, or self-images that

have given us a sense of security and belonging for much of our lives. Even if those things aren't particularly healthy for us, or those ideas aren't necessarily true, holding on to them feels more reassuring and safe than the frightening prospect of letting go and moving forward into the unknown. I personally know a little bit about this.

Until the age of thirty-five, I lived under the fearful shadow of being gay. I buried it deeply. I hide it quite well. However, like my being left-handed, it was an inexplicable part of my nature that no amount of praying or counseling "spiritual warfare" could ever change. So when I met Thom, and for the first time in my life, experienced a deep and overwhelming emotional and physical and spiritual connection, I realized I was.....in really serious trouble! I could no longer pretend to be something I now *knew* that I was not. So in spite of the life-changing, career-ending, pain-causing impact, I realized that it was time for me to surrender and finally face the truth. I owed that to my wife and my family, my friends and my Church family, myself and my Creative Source.

Sometimes in Life, the changes we most strongly fear and dread and resist, are the changes that are most critical for our personal growth and our interpersonal integrity. And while change and growth may be quite painful, it's not nearly as painful, or damaging, as building a false fortress to fearfully hide behind. When I finally gave up my life of self-delusion, I did lose the comfort and security of my well-rehearsed role as a traditional husband and father, son and brother, pastor and teacher. And while some people from my past still can't accept me as a close family member or friend, my authentic relationships with my daughters and exwife and many, many others, are far more deep and meaningful than they could have otherwise ever been. And the relationship I now experience with my Divine, Creative Source, is more genuine and liberating than ever before. It reminds me of Jesus' powerful proclamation: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free!"

The truth is, that no matter who we may be, you and I - at our essential core - are beloved sons and daughters of our One Heavenly Parent. We really *are* brothers and sisters to one another, and to every other person on this planet. And as you and I journey together in this loving, welcoming, and inclusive family of faith, we can help each other let go of the fears that would keep us from truly living. And by letting go of our fears, we are free to take hold of the loving hand of Jesus Christ - the One who calls us to *die*

each day to the counterfeit security of worldly power and wealth and false facades. The One who invites us to *live* each day in the Holy Realm of Truth, Compassion, and Genuine Peace.