

The Cost of Loyalty

1st Weekend after Pentecost – May 21/22, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Matthew 10:34-39 (NRSV)

³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵For 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;

³⁶and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

³⁷Whoever 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; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Last week, we heard Jesus call us to undiluted commitment. When Jesus says follow, we follow. Today, we will hear Jesus call us to undivided loyalties. There is only one Lord and his name is Jesus.

Hard sayings of Jesus

Last week and this week, we are confronted by difficult and surprising sayings of Jesus. Last week, a man wanted time to bury his father before following Jesus, but Jesus wouldn’t have it, saying to the man, “Let the dead bury the dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:59-60). This week, Jesus is instructing the twelve disciples as they prepare to go out on their own to proclaim the Good News. Among other things, Jesus tells them that he has come not “to bring peace but a sword” and “to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother.” Frankly, none of this sounds much like the Jesus I heard about in Sunday School, as a child or as an adult. What are we to really make of such teachings?

On my bookshelf, I have a copy of *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by a father and son team. The father, James Carroll, is a life-long Presbyterian pastor. His son and co-author, John, is an associate professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary. In the book, they look at a number of Gospel passages that rock us back on our feet, or at least should. For each passage, the scholarly son had written an interpretation of the passage and the pastoral father has taken the son’s work forward to a sermon. They seek to knock us out of our “easy chairs of faith.” They look at sixteen passages of Jesus’ teachings and hardly even get to last week’s passage about not taking the time to bury the dead!

So what gives? Nearly all these hard sayings are in the context of Jesus teaching his disciples, reshaping their understanding of God and God’s kingdom, and of their own place and responsibilities in it. Jesus knew that he had a lot of work to do and pulled no punches in helping them to understand the gospel in all its glory. As John Carroll wrote, “Jesus dares to replace our vision of things

Matthew the Tax Collector

The tax collector. You could hardly find a more despised person in all of Judea and Galilee than a tax collector. It wasn’t so much the taxes, as it was the way the collectors went about collecting them and more.

Tax collectors were entrepreneurs. They would enter into a contract with the Roman authorities to collect the taxes due Rome. They were free to collect/extort any amount that they could get away with. The tax collectors would keep for themselves all amounts over what was due Rome. As I said, the tax collectors were an entrepreneurial bunch.

Thus, we aren’t surprised by John the Baptists’ reply when tax collectors came to be baptized and asked what the ought to do. John said, “Don’t collect anymore than you are required to” (Luke 3:12-13, TNIV). When the tax collector, Zacchaeus, comes to faith in the Lord, he promises to repay four-fold all those whom he has cheated (Luke 19:1-9).

When Jesus approaches a tax-collector named Matthew, he simply tells the tax-collector, “Follow me.” And Matthew does just that, “He got up and followed him” (Matthew 9:9). By this act, Jesus calls one of the most outside-outsiders to be one of his twelve disciples. To drive home his point, Jesus immediately heads to dinner where he eats with an assortment of unsavory types (“sinners”), including some more tax collectors. All the “right” sorts of people, such as the Pharisees, are enraged by Jesus’ blatant display of fellowship with sinners. But as a physician would, Jesus has come to those in need (see Matthew 9:10-13). Jesus’ invitation to the kingdom is open to all, even a despised sinner like Matthew.

with a new one. . . . And so Jesus, in challenging our familiar and comfortable world, can only succeed by making exaggerated claims, by painting extreme images. He must, in a word, *attack* the world that we have allowed to define us, the life we love so much, in order to give us a new life.”

In the just-completed Good Life series, we ended by considering Paul’s words about the “renewing of our minds,” this fundamental reshaping of each of us. Perhaps we could think of Jesus’ hard sayings as the fire-hardened steel chisels that it takes to break through all our defenses so that we can emerge from our shell and see the light of God’s love in all its fullness. We must not shy away from the hard sayings; rather, we must embrace them and pray for understanding.

The cost of loyalty

The Good News¹ is our proclamation that Jesus is Lord² – no one else, nothing else. And if Jesus is Lord, then, well, Jesus is Lord. Merriam-Webster’s defines lord as “a ruler by hereditary right or preeminence to whom service and obedience are due.” That works for me. There may be many minor lords and kings and powers in this world that demand service and obedience, but there can be only one LORD, one King of kings, one Lord of lords. For the many millions living within the Roman empire, the Lord of lords was Caesar. But the Christians proclaimed that the Lord of lords is Jesus, to whom even Caesar would one day bow.

And as the Lord of lords, Jesus demanded undivided loyalty to himself. If that meant a son would be divided from his father, then so be it, Jesus comes first. If it meant that a daughter would be shunned by her mother, then so be it. Jesus comes first. You and I don’t live in a world where our loyalties are likely to be tested in so direct a way. But in the lives of the early Christians such tests came far too often.

In those first centuries, the Christians were seen by many in the pagan world as a strange sect who met at night, spoke of a Lord other than Caesar (never a very safe thing to do), and engaged in unusual practices, including something about eating the body and drinking the blood of this Lord. Scary stuff, I imagine, to many parents. Rather than being seen as upholders of family values in the empire, Christians were seen by some as destroyers of families, for the Christians insisted upon loyalty to Jesus and to the people of God even if it meant being shunned by your family.

You and I are not likely to be shunned by our families for being Christian, for proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. But our loyalty is tested in other ways, ways that we might even have trouble seeing. And in these tests, in the choices we make, there can be no higher priority than Jesus. Not our families, not our jobs, not our aspirations. Our creator must come first. Again hearkening back to the Good Life sermon series: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

Finding my life

We all want to find ourselves, to find our place in life, our purpose. Vast portions of television are devoted to the search. But here is the great truth that Jesus teaches. We cannot find ourselves by looking inward. No amount of navel-gazing or other me-oriented searching is going to bear fruit. You can look yourself over from top to bottom but you’ll never find your true *self*.

To find ourselves, we must look outward, toward God and toward one another. To find your *self*, you must stop looking for it and, instead, look for Jesus, in whom you will discover your *self*. Jesus never spoke truer words. We are created by God in God’s image. How could we ever hope to find our *selves* unless we begin with God. And what direction does God send us in realizing the full potential of our *selves*? Outward . . . loving God and loving neighbor. Only by losing our life will we ever find it.

¹I’ve noted this many times over the last three years in these studies, but it simply cannot be overemphasized. In your NT, “Good News” and “gospel” both translate an underlying Greek word, *evangelion*. In the Roman empire, the *evangelion* was a proclamation carried out to the provinces with the news that a son had been born to Caesar or that a new Emperor had taken the throne. The NT writers used it in exactly the same way, but with one change. For them, the proclamation, the *evangelion*, is that Jesus is Lord – not Caesar. It is still a proclamation about kingship, but about the true king.

²I can’t resist making another point here. Christians will often say something like, “Jesus is Lord of my life.” Well, alright, but I think it misses the mark. The point of the *evangelion* is that Jesus is Lord of everyone, whether they know it or not. It is not my agreement that makes Jesus Lord, it is God who has made Jesus Lord. Jesus is Lord even of those who deny him. Read the great Christ-hymn of Philipians 2:5-11 on this. To put it another way, the *evangelion*, the Good News, is not a private proclamation; it is a very public proclamation that encompasses all of God’s creatures and creation.

Daily Bible Readings

(more hard sayings of Jesus)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Mark 9:42-48 Self-abuse? Does anything matter more than the kingdom?</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 20:1-15 When grace is not fair. Good news indeed.</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 16:1-8 Praise for a dishonest manager?</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 14:16-24 Left out at the final banquet</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 10:30-35 How could our enemies be better neighbors than we are?</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

St. Andrew Summer Lecture Series – begins Monday, June 13

Each summer, we offer a casual summer series. This year, we'll meet on the *second Monday* in June, July, and August. There is no sign-up required. Just come down to Piro Hall around 6:45 or so. We'll have refreshments and spend a little time getting to know one another. Scott Engle's lecture will start at 7 pm.

We'll wrap up no later than 8:30. Our topics will be:

June 13: "The Surprising Truth about Sin"

July 11: "Amazing Grace"

August 8: "Being Right, Wrong, and Righteous"

Our Times and the End-Times: A fresh look at biblical prophecy

This Teaching Series with Scott Engle is underway
Sundays at 9:30 in Wesley Hall through June 5

May Book Recommendation

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future, by Craig Hill

This is the probably the best book on the subject currently available for laypeople. Few topics interest Christians more than speculation about the End-Times. And few topics are so rife with misconceptions and poor biblical interpretation. But Craig Hill's book is a great antidote. Hill tackles subjects ranging from our understanding of Scripture to the books of Daniel and Revelation to popular, but unbiblical, teachings about the so-called Rapture. You can pick up a copy at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Loyalty can be pretty perplexing. We want others to be loyal to us. We want to be loyal ourselves. President Bush has remarked that loyalty to himself and to the office is one of the most important qualities he seeks in those who work for him. Yet, how far does this loyalty go? When does our loyalty threaten to drag us across the line into unwise choices?

You might share some stories about times in your own life that loyalty posed a problem. Have you ever felt betrayed by a person you thought was loyal to you? Should you have felt betrayed? Has "disloyalty" ever been the right path for yourself or for someone you know?

People in our lives, even a president, can be mistaken or worse. Our loyalty to anyone might be misplaced under the right circumstances. But how about Jesus? What does it mean to be loyal to Jesus? Can our loyalty to Jesus ever be misplaced? How do we know what it means to be loyal to Jesus?

Finally, read back over the closing paragraphs in the study on finding ourselves. Spend a few minutes talking about your reactions to these paragraphs. Discuss what you think Jesus means by losing our lives so we can find them. How does this relate to the preceding verses on loyalty and priorities?