

Luke 14:25-33

9/9/2007

Last weekend, I had two house-guests from Oklahoma staying at the Rectory. They are my oldest and dearest of friends, Eli and Angelica. I have known Eli since we were in Mrs. Woolbright's fourth grade class. On the first day of school, Eli walked into class with one inch thick glasses and a broken collarbone. Despite his poor eyesight, he had attempted to jump a retaining wall on his skateboard. Perhaps, it was *because* of his poor eyesight. Right then, I knew that we would fast become friends. Eli, also remembers meeting my nerdy fourth grade self. Apparently, at recess, as he haphazardly made up answers to math problems, I told him that he better start taking his life seriously, or he would never get to do anything fun in life, like go to "Showbiz Pizza and flip his lid." Kids say the darndest things.

Angelica, I met a few years later in middle school, when I was a *bit* more refined. Angelica and I thought we were *tres chic* in our early 90's / late 80's colleziones of leather bomber jackets that we wore to Enid High Football games. I also had hair that rose several inches in a flip, with the assistance of a generous amount of glue-like product, while Angelica had Southern Girl 4 inch big bursting bangs. I also used to do her homework for her, when she refused to read "Great Expectations." The two, Eli and Angelica, seemed liked a natural match. I had lectured both of them about homework. I introduced them, and 10 years later, I was the "Honor Attendant / Male Maid of Honor" at their wedding.

Now, at the ripe old age of 31, Eli and Angelica are getting ready to have their first baby, a boy named Liam due to arrive on the anniversary of my ordination, December 28th. They are full of excitement and anxiety. Angelica could not stop talking. Eli was giddy with the prospect of having a son. Every maternity shop in a twenty mile radius has been shopped, and the "oohs and agh's" of baby clothes have been liberally deposited throughout the tri-state area. They were enjoying their last moments as a couple without children, a couple, that is, with a pregnant mom who has ankles the size of cantaloupes.

On our last night together, we watched videos that we made in high school. We watched as we attempted to chase after a thief at Wal-Mart. We were humming the theme song to "Cops" as a man darts across a screen. We never caught him. Halfway through the video, we sat dumbfounded at how young we looked, how silly we were, how our style was dated, and as a result, how old we look now. It was like a family watching home movies, gentle teasing, fond memories. And in a very real sense, we are family. We have a shared history. We have a shared future. They loved me when I felt unlovable. I loved them when perhaps they did too.

And this idea of family, being on the verge of something new, brings me to the Gospel reading for today. This Gospel reading from Luke, at face value, seems to have an anti-family-values stance. In fact, it is rather inflammatory. There are no silly baby pants, called Pond Pants, with frog-like webbed toes. There are no silly onesies with owls or peacock costumes for infants (yes, we did see them). Instead, we have Jesus saying, "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." And horror of horrors to new parents who shop, Jesus closes by saying, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

And those words are what I would like to talk about today. We cannot let them go unnoticed. They are too harsh. Family members must hate to be disciples? We have to hate life, and we have to get rid of our possessions? It does not sound like the Jesus I know and love. But taken in the context of this particular Gospel, I have to say that I agree with what Jesus is really saying. But what Jesus is saying is hardly visible at first glance. We need context. So, to the context we go.

At first, we might think that Jesus has been misquoted. Perhaps he was just senatorally tapping his toe under the stall and didn't really mean anything. Maybe we can omit his comments from the Bible. But context says differently. Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus also says, "I come to bring division. A family of five will be divided two against three." (12:51-52). Jesus does seem to be saying that families as we know them will be de-constructed, that something is wrong with them as they were then. And we might even be at enmity with one another and with life itself to change that reality. But is it possible that this could be a good thing? Is it possible that these words are about Jesus' love and not hate?

To answer that, we need more context, we need to talk about what the concept of "family" even meant to Jesus. Although families could be the loving entities we HOPEFULLY know them to be today, families, in the ancient world, were often nothing more than tribes that could easily wage war on other families or tribes. You might honor your Mother and Father, but you also might not love your neighbor as yourself. Think Capulets and Montagues. Families were also sources of internal conflicts. Think sibling rivalries, Joseph and his dreamcoat, and parental issues. We still have those. And furthermore, in families, some individuals were and are isolated. You can imagine Jesus, who could have easily been treated as the product of adultery, feeling this reality acutely. And Jesus here is attempting to de-construct the old way of thinking about families. He is accurately saying that there is something wrong with the foundation of many families and groups. Many families and communities have a unity forged out of fear, and jealousy, hatred of those outside and inside, and tribalism. It is their modus operandi. And Jesus is telling us that we are worth more. Perhaps, in our modern world, with many of us having a more positive sense of family, it would be best to translate Jesus' words of "father and mother, wife and children," and especially the word, "Life," as any community, any relationship which is based on self-protection and envy, because contextually Jesus here is really talking about de-constructing any family or community unified by those principles. And although I do not think that Jesus wants us to hate people, I do believe that he is calling us to a different reality, like a friend telling us that we are worth more than any abuse that we might be suffering or inflicting.

Finally, Jesus says, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." And here is where we need context most of all. It might seem like this comment is completely unrelated to family relationships, but then we have misunderstood the word "possession." Possessions, in this sense, is not about material goods, but about overly controlling another person... Possessing that person.... Possession. Jesus is saying something that psychologists would now agree with, that if we try to overly control and own and hold onto them, even our children, the fact is, we are beginning a power struggle, not a loving relationship. And Jesus is telling us to distance ourselves from that way of being in relationship.

Our reading today stops there. But to be more responsible with the Gospel of Luke, if we really value context, we should not stop reading until we reach the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And I offer the Parable of the Prodigal Son as proof that what Jesus says here is more profound than what appears at first glance. In today's Gospel, we might have Jesus de-constructing the more "traditional" family values of enmity, but in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we have Jesus reconstructing what a family should be. In that story, we see a father give all that he has, his "Possess"ions, away to his two sons. One hoards it, the other wastes it, but everyone operates out of self-protection. We know the story. But the Father still insists on forgiveness and open arms, he finds a new form of unity. This is the family value of Jesus. Jesus founds a new family on caring for everyone, even people who are profligate with what they have been given, even people who rebel against the open arms. Jesus is de-constructing the concept of a family of rivalry, and replacing it with the concept of a graceful human family sharing responsibility and loving God.

Like many teens, I felt fairly worthless when I was growing up. I did not fit into the tightly formed mold that I was supposed to. In the midst of that, Angelica and Eli cared for me. Instead of joining in with others to make me feel worse, they reached out. We laughed and formed a new family in which it was ok to be ourselves. Ideally, this is what we are about at church here at St. A's, forming a new kind of family, welcoming new people in, Laughing together, being joyful sharing the radically forgiving, open, un"possessing" love of God. And broadening our old ideas about family and unity. On this first weekend of a new time together, I hope, I pray that is what we carry in our hearts.