

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost ≅ Year A
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
June 26, 2005

The Imitation of Christ

Lessons for the Day

- ✘ Psalm 89:1-18
- ✘ Isaiah 2:10-17
- ✘ Romans 6:3-11
- ✘ Matthew 10:34-42

Homily

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator**, **Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains us and empowers us to love and serve them both.

Amen.

Let's briefly revisit a portion of today's Gospel lesson:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; *I have not come to bring peace but a sword*. For 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*; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me . . . "

Matthew 10:34 - 37 (NRSV)

When I first read this passage, I was tempted to back out of being with you here today.

This **does not sound like the Jesus we are most-used-to** -- the Jesus of loaves and fishes, the Jesus of wine-into-water, the winsome Christ who (in Don's language from last week's sermon) seduces us and draws us toward Him and inexorably into the gravitational field of God's consuming love.

What in the world is going on here? And what can we learn from this passage about our own life in Christ?

It will help us to understand what today's passage means if we locate it in Matthew's overall narrative.

The **early chapters of Matthew** deal with Jesus' genealogy, birth and baptism. In the **fourth chapter** of the Gospel, Matthew tells us of Jesus' temptation and the call of the first disciples.

One commentator [Reginald Fuller; Virginia Theological Seminary] notes that **Chapters five through ten** deal with Christ as the **"Messiah of Word and Deed"** The **words** appear in chapters five through seven -- we know them as the Sermon on the Mount. The **deeds** are found in chapters eight and nine -- a collection of miracle stories that includes the stilling of the storm and the healing of the centurion's servant.

All of which sets the stage for today's lesson . . .

In **chapter ten of Matthew**, the Christ-of-deed summons the twelve disciples, commissions them for ministry, and instructs them on what to say as they go out in mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Christ tells them what to take with them and how to behave as they go forth, and then He warns them of the prospect of persecution.

And finally -- in the verses appointed for today -- **Christ speaks of discipleship and the rewards for disciples who are faithful**. It is in *this* context that Christ says:

"whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me . . . "

Matthew 10:37a (NRSV) "

Let me be clear: Christ is not asking us to stop loving our mothers and fathers and the members of our own household -- not at all. Rather, **Christ enjoins us to love Him most of all**. And to let the living of our lives issue forth from -- and reflect -- our love for Christ.

I once heard someone say: "**Show me that thing that you love above all else, and I will show you your God.**"

Christ is asking us to make Him the thing -- the person -- that we love above all else. To acknowledge him as the Lord of our lives. To let the loving of our mothers and fathers and the members of our household issue forth from -- and be grounded in -- our preeminent love for Him.

This is not some saccharine, smarmy love either. Hear what follows:

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

Matthew 10:38, 39 (NRSV)

So what? If I **did** want to love Christ is this way -- **to love Christ above all else** -- what would I do? **How would I live?**

Somehow, I am reminded here of a story I once heard. I don't remember the whole story -- it doesn't much matter. What I **do** remember is the punch line:

"It's better to be an imitator than no 'tater a' tall"

Perhaps -- if we **did want to love Christ above all else** -- we would **live our lives in imitation of Christ**. This living in imitation of Christ is not a new idea. In fact, a fifteenth century monk named Thomas a Kempis wrote a wonderful series of instructions for monastic novices that were gathered together into a book called *The Imitation of Christ* -- I recommend it with great enthusiasm.

So -- how might it look if we did live in "imitation of Christ"? How might Christ become the model for a faithful and obedient life? **What did Christ do -- what might we imitate?**

Consider the gospel record -- what do we see Christ doing?

- **Christ consistently befriends and comforts those who are on the margins of society** -- the sick, the imprisoned, the poor. In fact, He goes to great lengths to seek them out -- sometimes to the consternation of his disciples.

How might you love those on the margins? Is God calling you to the Summer Enrichment Program, The Augustine Project, or the Jail and Prison Ministry?

Is God calling you to Stephen Ministry, to be a Lay Eucharistic Visitor, to study for membership in the Order of Saint Luke?

What are your gifts? What is your call? **How can you imitate Christ in service?**

- **Christ stays connected to His Source**. Christ continually makes time in his life and his heart to withdraw from the fray of life and reconnect with God.

How might you nurture your own spiritual life? Is God calling you to EFM or Alpha? Have you participated in these and loved them? Perhaps God is calling you to serve as a leader?

What are you doing for your soul? **How can you imitate Christ in seeking to be present to God?**

- **Christ values money and "stuff" appropriately**. Unlike many in his time and place, Christ did not see matter or the physical world as profane and the spiritual world as sacred. Christ celebrated that all was of God -- no dualism for him!

On the other hand, as Satan found out early in his temptation of Christ, Jesus was not enslaved to the material world. Christ knew -- as some of us discover late -- that no 'thing' (and nothing) could fill the hole in the heart made only for God.

How does our giving reflect our values? What is it we own that matters more to us than God? How can we clear our lives of so much stuff and leave more room for God? **How can we live in imitation of Christ as we relate to our money, the things we own, our stuff?**

The call in today's Gospel is not to fear loving our mothers or our fathers or even ourselves. **The call is to love God in Christ above all else -- and to let all other love issue forth from our love for God in Christ.**

Saint Anselm of Canterbury is reported to have said:

"God is that -- beyond which -- there is no other."

May our love for Christ be love beyond which there is no other as well.

AMEN