

This morning, in verse 26 of Luke 14, Jesus proclaims, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters... cannot be my disciple.” Now, this is strange to hear! In order to be a true believer, I must actually hate my own earthly parents??? I must hate my biological father? But surely, in those original 10 Commandments, doesn’t God instruct us to, “Honor your father and your mother” (See Ex.20:12)? Hmm...Perhaps we need to be looking for something deeper here.



The Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau
by Peter Paul Rubens

What both the Old and New testaments are saying this morning speaks to the difference between the way God loves and the way man does. There was no reason for God to choose Jacob to become Israel the Patriarch; no reason at all to choose Jacob to found the Davidic line which would eventually lead to the birth of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Yet, God **did** choose Jacob, the younger son who through trickery had swindled Esau out of the elder brother’s birth right. God chose Jacob over Esau, clearly not because Jacob was more deserving, but simply because God loved him. Jacob, who was little more than a thief; Jacob who, just like you and me, had no real contribution to make to his own salvation. It was all God’s choice. And that’s the point; that’s what God’s love, called “grace” is all about. We’re not redeemed because we’re such deserving creatures. We’ve never done anything remotely good enough to merit God’s wondrous love!

And, at the point where God chose to reach down and redeem this sinner, I can promise you that I was far away from any definition of being a “righteous person.” I still am. Yet even in my sordid, selfish, twisted state, the LORD God chose to reach down and lovingly redeem me. The concept is stunning! God, amazingly, incredibly **chose** to love us, right the way we are. And He has saved us, and by the bloody sweat and passion of His cross, and with the glorious morning of His resurrection, He has redeemed us as His own. You and I are God’s prized possession. Think of that! What wondrous love, indeed!

And how am I to respond to that sort of dumbfounding, startling love? Why, the only way I can, which is to love Him back, with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. (See Deut.6:5; Mt. 22:37; Mk.12:30; Lk.10:27) And isn’t this kind of love, so freely shared out between the Lord of infinite love and his children, vastly different from anything else? I think that’s what Jesus is saying in the Gospel passage this morning. “If you really want to receive the victory that is to be had in knowing and loving me, you have to be willing to go beyond earthly love. Earthly love just won’t do. It’s not enough, if you want to love me, because I invented love.”

Now, the kind of love that you have even for your dearest family member, your spouse, your children and parents, that’s all wonderful. But God demands another kind of love, a sort of all-in, no-holds-barred, no-holding-back kind of love. And the incredible thing is, if you let the Holy Spirit into your life and love The Lord that way, He gives that love right back to you and more besides. But, and good people hear this very clearly this morning, nothing, **nothing** is to take the place of that ultimate love between the Lord and His children. Its constant supremacy in our lives cannot be sacrificed to anyone or anything else. And if you value the love of anyone or anything in this life above your love for Our Lord, then I need to tell you this morning that you are headed away from The Cross. And that is what it means when Christ says we can’t come to Him or be his followers if we love anyone more than we love Jesus. That’s part of what “picking up your cross” is all about.

The Old Testament reading today is the famous passage of the potter’s wheel. Jeremiah realizes that there is no sufficient earthly logic for understanding God’s motives. (See Jer.18:6-9) And if you and I were to try and explain God’s loving mercy by the righteousness of our own lives, we would all come up short.

Nevertheless, God chooses to love the likes of you and me. He shapes us into beautiful vessels, fit to adorn His Kingdom, not because we deserve it but simply because He chooses to love us. To quote the old Sinatra song, “How lucky can one guy be?” And when we stand before that kind of immense love, how are we to understand it? How can we even hope to grasp the first thing in order to return that kind of love?

The only way to truly understand this level of adoring love from God was for God to open the door of our hardened hearts. Something huge had to take place, to open our hearts wide enough to receive this fire-hydrant kind of love. For God to bring his children into loving communion with Him needed something so grand, so terribly beautiful that our very hearts would be changed. The only way our wandering hearts were going to be that tamed was through what happened on The Cross. That’s why it had to happen, you see. Without The Cross we just couldn’t get there. Without the passion, the terrible passion of The Cross, God’s people just couldn’t begin to understand how vast is the Father’s love for us.

If the 1st truth from the Gospel this morning is that you can’t be a disciple of The LORD until you open your heart wide enough to receive the passion of his Cross, the other huge truth from this Gospel passage concerns carrying that cross. In Luke 14:27 Jesus says, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” What did the crowds think when they heard Jesus say, “You must pick up your cross if you want to be my disciple?” What did they understand when they heard this? Well, when a prisoner in the Roman world was to be crucified, part of that sentence required the criminal to carry his cross. He had to carry his own cross from his place of sentencing to where the sentence was to be carried out. This was a very public display of the convicted person’s guilt. So, let me ask you, do you carry your cross with you through this life?

This year, I’ve been lead to think about why God calls Jeremiah to witness the crafting of this pot. And I think it goes to the real reason why God raises up his prophets. We’ve become used to thinking of prophets as people who can foretell the future. But God commissions His prophets in order to call his people to moral transformation and repentance. Our destiny isn’t written in the stars. Today’s psalm concludes with the declaration that we are lead in God’s everlasting way. (See Ps.139:24) Creation, you see, and our part in it is still very much in progress. We can all have some bearing on the shape and texture that forms the clay of our lives. God expects his children to influence their own destinies through a righteousness born of self-denial and selfless love of others. That is the appropriate response to His infinite grace and mercy. Leading that kind of love-filled life is what marks us as His children.

So, are you willing to admit publically and in true humility that you have indeed been a person guilty of leading a less-than-perfect life; yet God has chosen for some inexplicable reason to love you anyway? Are you proof that through the love of God which has so profoundly opened your heart, you are now truly His? Do people see the change? Is your life providing a testimony that will lead other people to the foot of that Cross? Oh, and by the way, are you willing to talk about it?

Our Father owns the cattle on a thousand hills. (See Ps.50:10) His vastness encompasses a myriad of nations. Yet He yearns, He aches to love you in this life as His own dear child. He will not allow His children to be possessed by anything except His love. God loves you, and he has **chosen** to do so. Nothing we can ever do could make us deserving of that love. And nothing you can ever do can make the Father stop loving you; even if you break His heart a hundred times, he still wants you back. He does ask, however, that you pick up your cross; that you return His love, openly, freely, whole-heartedly, and yes, even sometimes publicly. He requires that you share the joy found in His love with others. Because if you’re not willing to tell others how much you love somebody, well... it ain’t really love! My dears, you cannot be a Disciple of the LORD unless you are willing to pick up your cross and follow Him. And God demands that you open your heart to Him, so that you truly receive the gift of His Holy Spirit. And when you do, then yes, you have finally become His faithful follower. And you find that loving Him, and loving Him completely comes as naturally as breathing in. Are you there yet? Have you given yourself completely to the Father’s love for you? Do you strive every day of your life to return that love? And have you picked up your Cross, so that as you walk through this world people can look at you and say, “Yes indeed! There goes God’s child.” Are you God’s child? Oh, I hope so. I pray that you all will be some day, and that you will come to know what it means to delight in the Lord and to be the Father’s joy. “Happy are those whose delight is in the Lord. They are like trees planted by streams of living water. They bear much fruit as season gives way to season. For they are the Lord’s own, His children in whom He delights.” (See Ps.1:1-3; Prov.3:12) In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 08-09-16