

THE GOSPEL OF HATE
Joshua 24:14-28 ~ Luke 14:25-33
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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If you glanced at your bulletin while settling into your regularly assigned seat this morning, you may have noticed the sermon title “The Gospel of Hate.” If you were intrigued or at least curious, you may have opened your Bible to see the assigned text from Luke’s Gospel, only to read: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself cannot be my disciple.”

So much for gentle Jesus, meek and mild! He sounds more like the crazed leader of a cult than the One who “so loved the world.”

Your first thought was probably, “Well, Jesus was speaking metaphorically, not literally. Certainly the preacher will explain the Greek word for hate really doesn’t translate into the English word hate.”

Sorry, but it does. Say it in English, Greek or Baltimorese, it ends up reading “hate.”

Unfortunately, there are crazed cult leaders out there who’ve brainwashed their followers into doing just that, hate anyone who threatens the leader’s authority.

The Nazis did this quite effectively to their children, teaching them to put loyalty to the state above their love of family. These damaged children were encouraged to report their parents if they ever did or said anything against the Nazi creed. And, in recent memory, we can remember all too well the terrible stories of Jim Jones and David Koresh who chose violent deaths for themselves and their followers rather than surrender their power.

But even though Jesus did say, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...cannot be my disciples,” his words shouldn’t be put in the perverted context of Jonestown or the Branch Davidians. These guys twisted this text beyond recognition, making it work for their narcissistic and evil purposes.

So then, what did Jesus really mean when he said you must hate your siblings, parents, spouse and children? Was Jesus trying to destroy the foundational building block of human society?

Maybe we get a clue in Matthew’s report of what Jesus said. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” Matthew’s Jesus doesn’t say “you must hate” but rather, “you must love me more” than your family. In John’s Gospel you find a similar sentiment when Jesus asked Peter, “...do you love me more than these?”

(John 21:15) In other words where do you place your ultimate allegiance, in Christ or your family?

I once had a conversation with a man about God and faith who confidently declared, “My wife and children are my religion.” Some might say, “That fellow has his head on straight. If every man practiced his family values the world would be a better place!”

I don't think anyone would disparage his love for his wife and children, but after careful consideration some might find his religion fatally flawed because if you love anyone in a vacuum, that is, if your love isn't grounded in the eternal, you're setting yourself up for a fall.

What will happen to my friend if his wife dies before him? What if, God forbid, his children die, or almost just as bad, cut themselves off and want nothing more to do with him? His religion would die with them and he'd be left with nothing.

But what if his wife did outlive him and his children always adore him? It would seem his religion would continue to satisfy and enable him to be content. But what if one day something unexpectedly happens forcing him to choose between his family (his religion) and the greater good? For instance, let's say this same father's teenage son commits a crime and convinces his father to break the law by helping him cover up his crime. If his son is the object of his religion, his highest governing authority, what else can he do but worship and serve his son by shielding him from the law? That could be a consequence of making your family your religion.

When our Lord said we must hate our families he doesn't mean despise them, treat them with contempt and throw them under the bus. Instead Jesus reminds us our primary allegiance must be to God, over everything we know and love in this world.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus taught, “...seek first God's kingdom and all his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well.”

This verse helps us realize that even though Jesus is giving us an “either/or choice,” he's not forcing us into a “Sophie's choice,” that is a free will choice that offers no satisfying alternative. On the contrary, Jesus offers the best choice, empowering you to love your family with the love of Christ, the perfect, unconditional love that transforms and elevates our relationships, making them even stronger and deeper than we could ever make them on our own.

Here's what I mean. If you truly love Jesus more than your family, then you'll treat your family the way Jesus would. You'd be more patient, honest and kind. By loving Jesus more than your children, you'd be given the backbone and discernment to be a wise parent, knowing when to say “No” and not give in to their youthful enthusiasm and confusion.

Unfortunately there are times when Luke's phrase "hate" your parents, spouse and children becomes more appropriate if your loved one chooses a way of life that contradicts Christ's Gospel. Going back to the example of Nazi Germany, how many German Christians had to choose between a son or brother who joined the party and denied his primary allegiance to Christ? How many people today chose between Jesus and a family member who's involved in destructive or unethical behavior?

Again, if your primary allegiance is to Christ and his Kingdom you can't condone, let alone enable anything that devalues and destroys rather than elevates and builds up. You have to choose. There's no middle ground. That's all Jesus was saying. Choose this day who you'll pledge your allegiance to, Christ or the world.

A little later on in Luke's Gospel we see Jesus repeating himself saying the same thing in a different way and at the same time expanding the parameters. "No servant can serve two Masters for a servant will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other." You cannot serve God and wealth." (Luke 16:13)

This teaching shouldn't surprise us. Certainly if we put Christ over our families we should also be expected to put Christ over the material things.

Some Christians take this teaching literally and take vows of poverty. Others may not take that vow, but they do aim to live simply, not needing the latest gadgets, the biggest house and the newest car. These folks spend their money wisely and take their call to stewardship seriously, spending their money, time and energy not on themselves, but on others.

Then there's the rest of us. Especially in this risky economy we worry about shrinking incomes, rising bills and expenses, college tuitions, retirement, job security, the list goes on. That's why, now more than ever, we need to see Jesus' teaching, "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth," not as an extra burden to make us even more anxious but an invitation to be free from worry and fear.

Think of it this way, if you put Christ first, if you seek first the Kingdom, if you put Christ above everything, even your financial security then you'll find yourself calming down and trusting God will provide in all things. Is that a guarantee you'll never lose your job or empty your checking account? No. But it does mean whatever happens if you serve only the one, true Master, if you trust your life to him God will bless and keep you in ways you never imagined.

In the Book of Joshua just before Joshua led the people out of their forty year stint in the wilderness and into the Promised Land, he gathered them together, reminded them how God liberated them from slavery in Egypt, called them his Chosen People and led them through one crisis after another, and then Joshua gave them an ultimatum:

“Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods...of the Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”
(Joshua 24:15)

It's a no brainer, until you have to choose between God and your family or God and your wallet. But once you think and pray it through, once you learn from your mistakes and reconsider your bad choices, made with the best of intentions, you're always brought back to the only, best choice you can make.

Choose Christ; Choose the Kingdom

Choose Abundant Life

And you'll never be the same again.

Amen.