

Home and Family
Matthew 10:29-39
June 21, 2020 (Father's Day)
Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips



On Being a Godparent: Tim [Intro to "sermon hymn"]

I am not a father. But I have been a birth coach. I am not a grandfather (I could be) but I'm not. I am not a grandfather but I AM a godparent.

If you ask Eva Perez, she might tell you that I am "papa Tim," a name she gave me when she was a little girl after I had said something in a sermon about being sad not to have children of my own. On the next Father's Day, I arrived at my appointed place in the sanctuary and Eva had left me a card addressed to "papa Tim." That card still sets on my desk along with a photo of me pushing Eva in a stroller – this is the same young woman we celebrated last week having earned a degree in Informatics at the University of Washington.

All those relationships left me with one of the most wonderful memories of my life. It's that moment when one of those little ones reaches up and takes your hand – maybe it seems unconscious to *them* but it acknowledges a connection and a trust *you* cannot take for granted. Or when you are ready to cross a street or enter a crowd and you say, "Okay, take my hand," and they instinctively do.

I'm thinking about that this morning as we sing a song written by Thomas Dorsey following the devastating death of his wife and infant son. I think you can imagine why these words might come to him: "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand."

With gratitude for whatever relationship of connection and trust you have experienced in your life, I invite you to sing together ...

Hymn: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"

Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

What we imagine about "home" has everything to do with what we think about "family."

So, here's the text for today ...

Matthew 10:29-39

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father – your Abba. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³²"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Abba in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Abba in heaven.

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.

If you were looking for a Father's Day text, this probably isn't it.

But it *is* the one assigned by that cycle of Bible readings we call the "Lectionary." And maybe it's fortunate that, on this day, we take a look at how we think about family – especially when we will close this time together by singing about home.

I'll say again: What we imagine about "home" has everything to do with what we think about "family." I know that family can be complicated. As conflicted as mine has been, I am well aware that there are others who experience - and continue to experience - conflict far deeper than mine.

Reading Barak Obama's story in *Dreams of My Father* several years ago, I realized just how complicated family could be for someone with a father from Kenya, a mother from Kansas and, eventually, a stepdad from Indonesia.

And recently, at the suggestion of Lynn Gaertner-Johnston, I read Trevor Noah's autobiography. What a story about life in South Africa where his birth, by itself, was literally a crime. A child born of a white father and a black mother was against the law. He spent much of his childhood hidden away. And later he struggled to know where he fit in. When he was older, his stepfather, in a drunken rage, shot his mother in the head. Miraculously she survived. But imagine the family trauma.

Given that one of them became President and the other a hugely popular comedian, we might be tempted to say: "See, family does not always determine one's potential." But President Obama and Trevor Noah would probably be the first to tell you not to use their success as a reason to dismiss the challenges of family or to disrespect the dignity of families with a whole system stacked against them. As a society, we are set up to make the obstacles for some families higher and the indignities of life deeper.

But acknowledging the challenges and the complications and the conflicts of family is a long way from Jesus saying:

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 ...*

I didn't come to bring peace but a *sword*? Didn't Jesus just say five chapters earlier: "blessed are the peacemakers?" Of course, he slips immediately into: "blessed are those who are persecuted for justice sake."

As we have seen lately, the call for justice as the means for peace is sometimes met with persecution. The swords come out and the guns and the tear gas and the false accusations. Peace, yes! But let's be clear: being part of a crowd chanting "no justice, no peace" could get you killed.

And speaking of clarity, Jesus goes on in Matthew 5 to offer his own clarity on assumptions people are making about life:

You have heard it said ... "You shall not commit murder ... But I say, whoever is angry with a sister or brother" will be brought to justice.

You have heard it said ... "You shall not commit adultery ... But I say, everyone who looks with lust at a woman has already committed it."

You have heard it said ... "You shall not swear falsely ... But I say, don't swear at all ... let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' 'no.'"

You have heard it said ... "love your neighbor and hate your enemy ... But I say, love your enemies ... and if you greet only your sisters and brothers, how much better are you than other people who do the same."

Here in Matthew 10, it's like Jesus is saying: "You have heard it said, 'Honor your father and mother,' but I say to you, 'whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me.'"

This is startling. But Matthew's Jesus is often given to hyperbole. He uses outrageous language to get us to stop and think about the assumptions we are making about how we should live our lives - the way we think about our interactions with people and how we disrespect people and relationships and even our own word.

And how *do* we think about family?

Lutheran Pastor, Peter Marty, wrote an article this December titled "Has family become an idol?" He says:

I've been keeping my eye on a cultural trend: love of family is fast becoming an idolatry ... there are signs that devotion to family is in some quarters a religion in its own right, with family the object of ultimate allegiance.

He quotes some of these very passages from Matthew and then he says:

Jesus is dethroning the biological family and asking us to transcend our genealogy and clan enough to become members of a larger family ... Family can be a beautiful means to even greater affections. But when it becomes an end in itself, our availability to and for others shrinks dramatically. That makes for a very small religion.

I am proud to say that what I see of parenting in our faith community is what Marty calls "healthy family ... where we learn unconditional love ... [in] a laboratory for navigating relationships ... [and how, not only to] serve the family but ... move beyond it."

I think we would say that this is all part of what it means for us to follow the way of Jesus.

I know from your stories and mine that, in the process of trying to follow the way of Jesus, we find ourselves in difficult conversations sometimes. There's that holiday dinner with family that slides over into politics or religion and ends up in an explosion. Or we swallow our tongues and are left with that indigestion that goes with guilt or anger or pain.

Sometimes, in the course of following what we understand to be the way of Jesus, we find ourselves at odds with people we love; with friends we counted on; with the very communities that taught us and supported us and helped to grow us.

This exaggerated language of Jesus about family pushes us to think about what we are willing to risk – what cross we are willing to bear.

But I am sorry to say that there is another way to think about this.

Take the family that disowns a child in the name of Jesus because they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer – or simply for wondering our loud about who they are. Take the parents that claim to love Jesus more than their own children because they believe their child's sexual orientation or gender identity or ideas about God or relationships or the world is sin. Families who so desperately want to be worthy of the love of Jesus that they become enemies of their own sons and daughters and in-laws and parents. And, in some cases, disowning their own flesh and blood may genuinely hurt them deeply.

But they have heard it said: "whoever loves son or daughter more than me, whoever loves mom and dad more than me, is not worthy of me."

I can remember having to explain to people how it was that my parents, at one point, refused to accept my life and my relationships. "How could they do such a thing to their own son?" my friends would ask.

And I would reply, "they had heard it said, 'whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.'"

How is that they refused to come to the celebration of your life with Patrick?

"They had heard it said, 'whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.'"

The whole question of what it means to be "worthy" is problematic.

I would remind you that Jesus begins this section by saying: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Abba [noticing]; even the hairs of your head are all counted; so do not be afraid, you are of more *value* than many sparrows."

All of creation is worthy.

But you have heard it said, "whoever loves son or daughter more than me is *not worthy* of me."

In this exaggerated language about family, Jesus leaves a dangerous opening that is a window into how we think about family.

I was reading an article in the online Huffington Post by Rex Ogle. It's a familiar story – even with Supreme Court decisions and positive TV images and PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). It's a story about a young man whose father said: "If you choose to be gay, then you're no longer part of this family."

Rex left. He says: "I felt worthless." And spent the next months of his life not making enough money to live; being harassed by police for sleeping on a park bench; being attacked at a shelter; and scrounging for food in garbage cans.

When he couldn't take the hunger anymore, he called his abuela – his grandmother. All he wanted was some money for food. But she sent him a ticket and said "come home," meaning *her* house. "By that

point,” he says, “the word home had lost all meaning. But I went anyway. With her help, her love, and her emotional support, I got two jobs, a few scholarships and put myself through college.” And with his very religious abuela, Rex went on to create his own life and his own family.

We made a decision one day to make a young gay man who had been rejected by his parents a part of our church family. The experience of his life gave us this song we have been singing every Sunday about home.

Whatever we imagine about “home” has everything to do with what we think about “family.”

You may have heard it said, “whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

But we say: “Welcome home.”

And, today, if you hear that voice, please do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The autobiographies of Barack Obama and Trevor Noah are difficult but powerful stories. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (1995). It opens with a quote from I Chronicles 29.15: “For we are strangers before them, and sojourners, as were all our fathers.” Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime* (2016). Peter Marty’s article, “Has family become an idol?” is included in the December 17, 2019 *Christian Century*. The HUFFPOST article by Rex Ogle is posted on their website, June 29, 2018.