

Sermon Text: Matthew 10:24-39

I know this is a difficult scripture. We will try to apply it to our faith and our time today.

First, I want to mention what I did yesterday. Yesterday was my mother's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, and also the eve of that holiday we almost celebrate today. What is that? Father's Day. Father's Day. Anyway, my entire family of origin got together at my sister's house with assorted spouses, children, nieces, and nephews, and we had a great time – for a change. For once, they did not give me the usual hard time about being the favorite, which I deny. Because that makes it worse, they feel obliged to give examples of why they are right, and we're 12 years old all over again. I hope your family is better than that. In fact, if you consider yourself the favorite, raise your hand. All right! Now, if you know that someone who really is the favorite did not raise their hand, point at them. Okay. There are a few. All right. I know how that goes. Maybe all families are kind of the same.

We celebrate family quite a bit in church. We celebrated with a baptism today. We celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day a little bit, the birth of babies, anniversaries, etc., and then along comes Jesus with these iconoclastic things that Jesus is famous for saying, such as, “I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be the members of his own household. Whoever 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, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me, and those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” We ask, “But Jesus, don't you want us to love those people who really know us behind our public mask, and Jesus, don't you want us to love those who sometimes hurt us with neglect or a careless word or a competition gets out of hand? Jesus, we live and die for God and country and family, how can you ask us to separate them out and demand we love them less? How can you say that you come to bring division without some wiggle room to let us off the hook? Jesus, my family gave me life, they gave me identity and for good or ill, they tell me who I am. Jesus, I am confused at your words here, maybe I'll ignore them or pretend they don't matter.” We do that with this scripture.

The most familiar way we have of defining faith is the bad things we give up when we come to God. Now, think about it. How often we have heard or maybe even told the story of how we gave up drugs to follow God, we gave up alcohol or promiscuity or the vain pursuits of fame or obsessive chasing after wealth in order to follow God, you fill in the blanks. We give up bad things, life-stealing things, empty obsessions we give up in order to put God in the proper place, the very top of the priority list of our lives. Now, we don't mind hearing about that and celebrating giving up bad things for God, for faith, but when Jesus starts talking about giving up or loving less or causing division in our family, well that's giving up a good thing, isn't it? Why would Jesus say that? We know it is wrong to define ourselves by how much money we make or what kind of car we drive or what neighborhood we live in or nationality or race or any of another hundred of things that amount to dust, but family, family gives us the way our eyes look, that certain

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walk that our grandfather had, that crooked smile, or that way of singing. Family is blood and name and how we are known. It's who we are, isn't it? For good or bad, it's who we are! Isn't it? How can Jesus tell us to be something other than the family we were born into? What can he mean? Now, I know this is not really a very good Father's Day sermon, and I know that I did attempt a Mother's Day sermon of sorts, and I know that's not fair, but being a father, I also know that fathers are used to that kind of unfairness and will accept it in stride.

I read somewhere that Mother's Day cards were some of the highest selling that Hallmark has, and Father's Day cards sell about one-half. One-half the number. Everybody say, "Oh!" for fathers please. In a backhanded way, that might just illustrate what I think Jesus is saying here, in a way. Loving more or less.

Now, counseling – which is my wife's field, not mine, and I have no business delving into it, but it's my pulpit, not hers, and so I will – counseling very often deals with sorting out old, old wounds or emotional scars that we got where? From our families. Sometimes counseling has to get people to the point of understanding that spending our lives continually trying to win approval of our parents, sometimes even after our parents are dead, is an empty way to live, and sometimes even into adulthood, we make decisions based on some notion of what our parents would or would not want us to do. We get stuck in that loop of approval and disapproval of who our parents told us to be. That's no way to live, and Jesus never wanted people to just go along with the crowd, no matter what crowd we're talking about. He wanted choice, a choice for God. He wanted allegiance, allegiance to God. Sacrifice and service to God. Worship and working out of faith even when it takes fear and trembling and gobs of energy, working out our faith in God. Jesus taught that his disciples would need to define their lives in terms of their relationship with God, and that means anything less, anything, even family, must come second or third down the line. God first, and then, God first and then all the rest you need will be added unto you, but first, put God first. For some people, with a family filled with pride, it's hard to believe that Jesus' assertion that family does not have the last word on whom we are, but for some others I have met, they say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, God, that my family does not have the last word on who I am!" Thank you that I know God does. Whether it is positive or whether it is negative, family does not get the last word for any of us, God does. God calls out saying, "I love you. Yes, you have sinned against me and against others and against yourself, I still love you. You cannot put out my love. I will pursue you into whatever darkness, into whatever strange country you run into. I love you." God says, "You will never put me off or cast me out. I will always be there when you come to yourself and turn to come home into my arms where there is grace and life abundant and life eternal." Everyone who puts God first, and loses out in an earthly sense will win in the end because putting God first is what faith is. Do not let the world and the TV commercials or the latest fad define who you are. They don't get to do that either. Do not let even family define who you are. Let only your creator God, your savior God, your comforter God define who you are and what you should be as you grow in that faith. That faith defines you. Love God more. Love other things less.

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Rudyard Kipling was muttering deliriously, it is written, on his deathbed, and he was obviously trying to make some final statement, and those by his bedside could not understand what he was struggling to say, and finally one of the nurses leaned in close, and said, “Mr. Kipling, Mr. Kipling, what is it that you want?” Kipling stopped tossing for a moment, and he replied with the very last bit of strength he could muster, with nearly the last breath he had in him, he said, “I want God. I want God.” That is what Jesus is talking about. Wanting God the way a dying man wants God.

Once there was a man who had gone from one religious leader to another without any satisfaction, and finally, he consulted a wise, old monk who lived on a riverbank. The man pleaded, “Show me how to find God!” The monk said, “Well, do exactly as I say.” The monk brought in two friends, and the friends led the man into the river until the water was over his head, and these two men, working with the monk, held him down and kept his head under the water, and soon he began to panic and he began to struggle violently, but they held him under until what seemed to be the last possible moment. They let him up, and he came up gasping and sputtering for air, and when he regained his composure, the teacher asked him, “Tell me, what were you thinking about while you were under water?” The man replied, “Air. I wanted air to breathe.” The old teacher said, “This is what you have yet to learn. When you want God the way a drowning man wants air, then, then you shall find him.” Faith is more than a nod in God’s direction. Following Jesus means that we love God more and love everything and everyone else less. Let God tell us whom we are and what we are. That is God’s place. Old messages from our family, whether good or bad, do not define us. In Jesus, God is saying, “If your parents want to define you, your faith will cause you trouble between you and your parents. I define you. You are mine. If your wife wants to define you, your faith will cause you trouble between you and your wife because I define you. You are mine. If your husband wants to define you, your faith will cause you trouble between you and your husband. I define you. You are mine.” And so on with your boss and so on with the culture. God defines us as new, as new creatures, as forgiven and as redeemed beloved children of his kingdom, children of love and light. No one else can define us as less, and truth be told, any definition of self that anyone could hang on us would be less than a new creation, forgiven and redeemed and beloved children of God’s kingdom, children of love and light. Jesus would rid us of the conceit that we have in our self-definitions. Jesus would rid us of the conceit that we are superior to others who have a different skin color. He would rid us of the conceit that we are worth more because we live in a free and powerful and wealthy nation. Jesus would rid us of the conceit that our children and our families are superior to other people’s children and other people’s families. As we trust first in God, we also find our identity and our relationship with God. Identity first premised upon the fact that we are sinners. We are sinners in need of God’s mercy. We are sinners saved by grace, not by superior genes, not superior education, not superior anything lest anybody have a reason for pride. Before God, we have only reason for humility and trust. No bragging rights. Humility and trust. Loving God more and loving everything else less. God must have God’s proper place in our decisions, or we

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must admit that we choose lesser things to tell us who we are. We are the people of the God who showed us his love on a cross.

In 1942, Clarence Jordan founded the Koinonia Farm as a Christian mission in Americus, GA. The farm was a community of Christian farmers, but it immediately ran afoul of the culture all around it because it was 1942 in the country of Georgia, and he invited Christians of all race and of all status to come and live there and participate in the community, and the local Baptist churches withdrew their fellowship and support, and the local businesses boycotted the farm, and refused to supply goods and services, and they were bombed, actually bombed, and shot at and vandalized and robbed and harassed for living the Gospel as they felt called. Clarence Jordan asked his brother, Robert, an attorney, this was his brother, who later became a state senator, to represent Koinonia Farm legally and it led to this conversation. His brother said, “Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, and everything I have. It’s different for you.” Clarence said, “Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church on the same Sunday, and I expect when we came forward, the preacher asked me the same question he asked you, “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” I said yes, Bob, what did you say?” And he said, “I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.” Clarence said, “Could that point by any chance be the cross?” He said, “That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not going to get myself crucified.” Clarence said, “Then I don’t believe you are a disciple, you are an admirer. You are an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you are an admirer, but not a disciple.” Imagine two brothers having this conversation! Bob said, “Well, now if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?” “The question,” Clarence said, “is do you even have a church now?” Cross bearing is so simple we miss it. Putting God and Christ first it’s so simple that we miss it. Jesus was willing to follow God’s will even though it cost him the cross. The world saw Jesus as defeated and humiliated and dead. That is what the world thought following the cross, that he was gone, that they had defeated him, but then the resurrection, then the resurrection which said, “Surprise! The world does not have the last word.” Because of God, the world does not have the last word. We as people who know the Gospel should understand that following God will sometimes cost us, will sometimes make us look foolish in the eyes of the world, and maybe even in the eyes of our family. As people of the cross, we know the world does not have the last word. That truth has been broadcast into the world. Now, people of God, don’t live like you have not heard it! Don’t you let yourself be defined by anything less. There will be division. There will be division! Be found on God’s side no matter what anyone says, be found on God’s side. Amen.