

Sermon Starter – An Anabaptist-Mennonite Look at Commitment and Covenant

Luke 14:25-33

Here is a passage of importance to our theological ancestors, the early Anabaptists. While important, and even comforting, to them, it is a difficult passage for our modern ears. We are not sure what to make of it. When we read or hear these words about hating our family, we assume Jesus must be speaking figuratively or using hyperbole. Usually, our first impulse is to soften these strong words in some manner. In a country that often equates Christian faith with family values, we are pretty certain Jesus cannot be too serious here. And so, to this difficult passage, we may add some context to these words of Jesus. We can try to give a little nuance to this idea of “hating our family,” but it does not really soften the heart of message too much.

Commentators tell us that Jesus was using a type of figure of speech that we do not use anymore. In Jesus’ day, the way you stated a preference was by pairing two things and saying that you loved one and hated the other. It did not have anything to do with an emotional feeling of actually hating something, but was rather a matter of stating priorities. So, this might help our ears feel a bit less offended. But still, the message is about making the kingdom of God a priority over our families—not a simple thing (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Cowley Press).

Commentators also tell us that these words would likely not have offended those who first read them. In fact, they probably would have been words of comfort. The author, Luke, is writing to a community of people who are likely already estranged from their biological families. “In Luke’s time, it was the custom for whole households to adopt the faith of their heads. Everyone in the house was compelled to believe what that person at the top believed (most likely a male). So spouses, children, servants, donkeys—everyone—was to follow the beliefs and religious practices of the head of the household” (adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*).

So, if one person in the house—be it a child, a spouse, or even a slave—elected to become a follower of Christ, it was nothing short of mutiny; it was an act that separated a person from her or his family. To claim Jesus as Lord over Cesar was an act that could get the whole family in trouble. It would cast suspicion on the whole family. So, to many of these first Christians, these were words of comfort because they were separated from their families. Their choice to follow the life and teachings of Christ had separated them from their families.

Likely, reading these words of Jesus was comforting—normalizing—for them. It let them know that Jesus anticipated such a situation as theirs. Being cast out of their families was not their fault; rather it was something to be expected when making such a focused commitment.

This is also why this passage may have held such importance for many early Anabaptists who also were separated from their families by their choice to follow this new way of being. It spoke comfort to them and helped them renew their commitment to follow Jesus.

But still, while interesting, the plain truth that we don't want to hear is that Jesus is asking for a total commitment; a life lived with God's kingdom as our priority. Jesus is asking for us to call him "Lord," meaning that we swear our primary allegiance to the life and teachings of Jesus: not to proclaim Caesar as lord, or America as lord; not to proclaim capitalism or money as lord; not to claim being busy as our Lord; not even to proclaim our own mother or father, husband or wife, as our primary allegiance or focus in this life.

This is not an easy thing Jesus is asking of his followers—of us. But still, he asks. Rather than trying to gloss over such a passage, we probably should sit in the discomfort of it for a while. Allow that discomfort to shed some honest light onto our priorities; allow such a passage to help us reflect on those things that keep us from living a passionate life; to share our discomfort with others, to be honest with it; to listen to how some of these first followers of Christ have tried to live with the call to such a commitment.

From Leader, Summer 2014. ©2014 MennoMedia.