

## Pentecost XV

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*“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”* Luke 14: 25 ff

We thought we would be baptizing Anna Joy Mankhe this morning, and I have to say that to preach this Gospel reading at a baptism was a daunting proposition to me. The baptism has been postponed so that Anna's grandfather can attend, and that's a lovely reason for delay. And it eliminates one challenge to my preaching task this morning – addressing the loving family of the baptizee in the context of Jesus exhortation to “hate” the family if they get in between you and Jesus.

First, we need to understand what Jesus means by “hate.” He's not refer to the sentiment that almost every parent of a teenager has heard at one time or another, “I hate you.” It's not an emotion-laden concept, this Semitic word. Rather, it's almost the opposite, this “hate;” it's a way of expressing detachment, or turning away from.

If by preaching “hate,” Jesus had meant what we do today, this verse of Scripture would cancel all the calls to love, to understand, to forgive, and to care for others, particularly for one's own family – all those calls we find expressed throughout both Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament. Nor is hating one's own life a call to self-loathing, self-contempt, or self-destruction. It is not necessarily a call to crucifixion, either.

My suspicion is that while Jesus may have said these words about “hating “ the family and life itself, he did not ever tell all his disciples that they had to pick up their crosses. He may have known that his dangerous, provocative teaching and preaching put him on a collision course with disaster and even death, and he may even have known *by which death he was to die*, but I do not think he expected all his followers to die as well. Because then who would be left to bring about the Kingdom of God?

So Jesus is not inviting us to suicide in the service of faith, and he is not, I think, inviting us to martyrdom, although the hearers of Luke's Gospel would have known that some in the Jesus movement had indeed died martyr's deaths. He is, however, pointing out that loyalty to him can and will create tensions within the self over competing priorities, and perhaps between ourselves and those we love. And he is saying that in such a conflict of loyalties, he demands primary allegiance.

I suspect that for many of us here this morning, Christianity has divided us from our families in ways not anticipated by Jesus or his followers. Our families may have judged or condemned us, for being gay, for being divorced, for leaving a particular faith tradition, on the basis of their own “Christian” convictions. Or we may have joined a Christian church, surprising or scandalizing a family of secularists, atheists or robust agnostics. That’s a little different from what Jesus was talking about because, in Jesus’ time there was - as the bumper sticker says – *there was no secular world*.

So although the circumstances are different, many of us may have experienced a version of what Jesus is talking about: tension within families because of faith, detachment from our families because of faith – ours or theirs– a turning away, temporary or permanent.

I did a great deal of wonderful reading during my vacation. I didn’t read a single book of theology, per se, and that’s part of what made it a vacation! But that doesn’t mean I didn’t happen to read, intentionally and otherwise, a good deal about faith and religion. One of the most surprising and splendid books I read was a novel I picked up in the remainder bin and Brookline Booksmith. I had never heard of the author, Neil Gordon, or the book, which was called **The Company You Keep**. It was a page-turner, a tearjerker, and a thriller – a political, historical, interpersonal, and emotional thriller. The plot involved former members of the Weather Underground – members who had still *been* underground when the book’s events occurred, in 1996 – and who were recounting those events 10 years later, in 2006.

The story reminds me of today’s Gospel in several ways. One is Jesus’ emphasis, following his teaching about taking up the cross and leaving one’s family, his emphasis on the preparations needed to become a follower of Jesus. He talks of a builder who can’t complete a tower he’s started, and a king who can’t finish a war. He reminds us that if we plan to undertake a major commitment we need to ask ourselves a couple of questions: Do I have the resources to complete what I have started, and will I commit those resources fully to my purpose?

The story of Weather Underground members who had stayed underground for 25 years was an amazing story of elaborate escape plans, alternative identity creation and maintenance, eternal and unrelenting vigilance, and secrecy. I’ve read countless thrillers and detective stories, but never have I learned more about disguising one’s appearance or covering one’s tracks than in **The Company You Keep**. Neil Gordon interviewed a number of former real Weather people to write this book, and we all know that some of

those 60's revolutionaries did indeed stay underground for decades – and some, I suspect, still are.

So here were people who were committed to their cause and to the ongoing implications of the actions they'd taken in the past, including protecting themselves and others from apprehension and punishment both for real criminal acts and for political actions. Gordon weaves a tale of complex and binding loyalties among former comrades and lovers, parents and children, and shows that passion for a cause can indeed overtake one's entire life and change everything, everything, beyond recognition or imagination.

Another point of connection with the Gospel has to do with how commitment to a cause or movement can divide families. Perforce, these Weather Undergrounders were separated from their families of origin: the protagonist, Jason Sinai, can't attend his father's funeral, for example, and has no contact with his brother for 25 years. But then he discovers that his father and brother had been putting away money, all that time, for whatever he might need when he needed it. And the entire motivation for the events that break open in 1996, and reflect the events of the early 70's, - the passion that drives the action is Jason's concern for saving and protecting his own children. And of course the bonds and trust and loyalties that arise during the exigencies of the revolutionary movement of the late 60's, and all that followed during the underground years – those bonds create other families, families of intention, families of necessity, families of a kind of faith.

And what about the faith? Well, the faith of the Weather Underground had to do with the evils of society as they saw it, and the revolution they thought necessary to overcome those evils. They saw an imperialist country fighting an illegal war, a government trampling on the First and Fourth Amendment rights of its citizens, a country riven by racism and inequality. And, as the characters in the novel speak and write about those days from the perspective of 2006, they see that nothing much has changed.

Of course, what I haven't dealt with so far is that these characters had indeed committed criminal acts, many of them violent, some of them deadly. And as one of the characters says, "Our ideas were right, but our actions were wrong." It is hard to fault their social and political critique; it is easy to fault their methods.

But they were passionate, they were prepared, and they were committed. And ultimately they were, in many ways, faithful to their vision and to one another. They set out to make revolution, and they did not falter, extreme and dangerous and misguided

though they may have been. In many ways, I think Jesus would have been proud of these young fanatics, though I suspect the thought of his approval would have horrified them.

The faith of the Weather Underground had to do with the evils of society as they saw it, and the revolution they thought necessary to overcome those evils. That's not so different, after all, from Jesus' vision, the grounding of his faith, the conviction that God wants a world of peace and justice. Jesus saw an imperialist Rome occupying Palestine, rulers oppressing and exploiting the people, and the religious hypocrisy of his own tradition. The Weather people saw an imperialist country fighting an illegal war, a government trampling on the First and Fourth Amendment rights of its citizens, a country riven by racism and inequality, the hypocrisy of their parents' generation.

In 2006 what do we see? And what action does Jesus invite in response? What is our vision, the grounding of our faith? Are we prepared to follow that vision? Do we have the resources? Are we committed? What is the cross we are called to carry ?

Amen.